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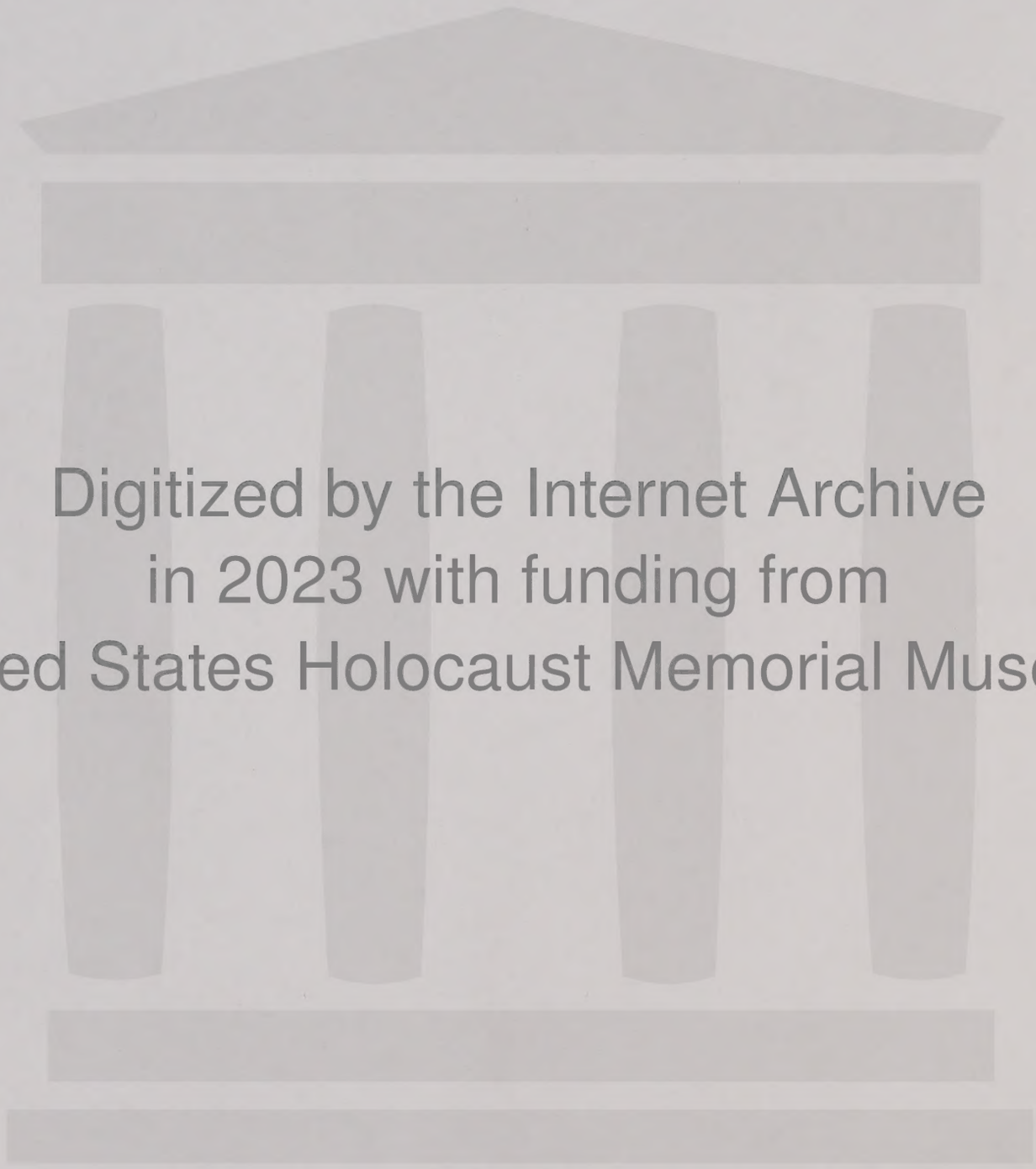
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ONE MAN IN HIS TIME

a memoir by

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ONE MAN IN HIS TIME

"All the world is stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages"

–Shakespeare.

PROLOGUE

"It was in 1868, when nine years old or thereabouts, that while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself with absolute assurance and an amazing audacity, which are no longer in my character now: 'When I grow up I shall go *there.* ' "

– Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record*

"Remembering is the path to salvation, forgetting leads to exile."

– Baal Shem Tov

PROLOGUE

No happy person writes his memoirs, someone said. A memoir is an account of the past. A happy person, according to conventional wisdom, lives in the present and plans for the future. Every moment that passes is now the past. The present was the future of yesterday. So if you don't remember the past, how do you exist?

When we remember we are like the projectionist who unwinds reels of film, shooting images onto the screen of a movie theater. But this film of our remembrance is never a film with a beginning, a middle and an end, for memory is maddeningly unreliable. Although we can see images in our mind, sometimes with startling vividness, memory is not orderly, chronological or logical. It is not neatly packaged, nor readily available for replay. It is quirky, confusing, full of blank spaces. It comes and it goes in segments that are uncontrollable. It is a vast amorphous mass of images that trigger endorphins in the brain's perceptual systems. They are the natural opiates of the brain. Some memories are hazy or distorted; some are not true memories but inventions of our mind– mere confabulations. When some events are forgotten, a part of our life has disappeared, and we are diminished.

Our life is a series of journeys– in space, when we go from one place to another; in time when we remember those journeys or when we become aware of aging. We are what we remember. We are what we read. We are what we remember of what we have read. Increasingly now, we are what we watch on T.V., cinema and computers screens. Sometimes we identify with the fictional heroes and try to emulate them; sometimes we get so engrossed in the lives and ideas of fictional heroes or celebrities we meet through the media that our entire existence is shaped by them. We develop a kinship with them, which exceeds the bonds of flesh and blood.

Such was my relationship with Joseph Conrad. For me, Conrad is truly a Colossus who bestrode my narrow world. There is an uncanny resemblance between his life and mine, yet no two men could be more different. I too was born in the Ukraine, three years before Conrad's death, but by that time it had become an Eastern province of an independent Polish Republic. My twin brother was called Joseph. I gave the same name to my son, to commemorate my brother (murdered by Ukrainian fascists) and also that other literary Joseph, who had already entered my existence in a secret but significant way.

When I was a little boy, while walking to school past the Orbis Travel office, I stopped in front of the display window, to gaze at a colorful, ocean-going ship, fashioned of plastic. Its portholes glowed, and the shimmering, blue waves around the vessel moved up and down. Like young Conrad, I said to myself with great conviction: "When I grow up I shall sail on such a ship. I shall travel to the ends of the world. I shall be an adventurer."

Before my childish wish was fulfilled, and was visited upon me with a vengeance, my adventures, like those of Conrad, were vicarious, by way of a varied reading fare. Like my future literary, and to an extent spiritual, mentor, I too was a reading boy. But Conrad was not in my high school curriculum. He was known in Poland as Józef (Joseph) Konrad Korzeniowski, viewed as an oddity, at times resented by nationalistic critics, who regarded him as a traitor, a Pole who wrote novels and stories in English, under a pseudonym of Joseph Conrad. Before I ever read any of his works, I had devoured the novels about the Wild West, written by the German writer Karl May, who had never set foot in America.

Although I read May in Polish translation, I learned my first English words from his heroic character, Old Shatterhand, and his noble Indian friend, Winnetou–

mostly vernacular exclamations with which May peppered his narratives. I was quite ignorant of their correct pronunciation. Conrad first set foot in England at Lowestoft, and served as ordinary seaman on the coaster *The Skimmer of the Sea*. He was twenty-two years old, as was I when I first came into contact with English-speaking people, and began to study English in earnest.

Conrad believed that one's literary life "must turn frequently for sustenance to memories and seek discourse with the shades." So does the ordinary, non-literary life of most mortals. Each of us, no matter how humble or poor, is a storehouse of memories. When a person dies that storehouse is gone forever–unless a survivor remembers.

"If a man live many years, *and* rejoice in them all; " Ecclesiastes wrote, "yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many." I have lived many years, and rejoiced in them all, but I also remember the many days of darkness, the anguish of loss and bereavement. The dead of mine– my memories of them– have become a precious legacy. I shield it as if it were a candle, flickering in a dark and drafty room.

PART ONE

A TALE FROM BAGHDAD

1

When I set out for Baghdad in September,1942, I had a vision of an ancient Oriental city out of a fairy tale – a colorful panorama of mosques with lofty minarets and balconies from which turbaned muezzins summoned the faithful to prayer. It was the city of The Arabian Nights, evoked by the stories Scheherezade told to the cruel Sultan Shahriar. From my childhood reading, I remembered a city ruled by Caliph Haroun-al-Rashid, where Sindbad the Sailor lived, and where he gave an account of his seven voyages. It was a city with giants, evil genii, strange-looking dervishes, scheming viziers, Ali Baba in the cave of the forty thieves, Alladin and his wonderful lamp. Why couldn't I summon a genie who would get me out of this land?

I knew nothing of the real city where I would carry out one of the most momentous decisions of my life. The Baghdad of 1942 had no magic, no enchanted beasts, no singing trees or talking birds. There were no sultans, no viziers ordervishes. This Baghdad was no "City of Peace" described in the second voyage of Sindbad the Sailor. It was a city of dread, but also of promise. The mosques with the minaretswere still there, but Baghdad appeared drab and dusty. Perhaps there were some splendid palaces erected by ancient caliphs, and the bazaars were still exotic. As I watched the streets from the cab taking me to my hotel from the railway station, I saw mostly low,

dun brick buildings. There were very few trees or flowers. The city was surrounded by huge military encampments of the British Army, soon to be reinforced by General Anders's Polish Army, recently arrived from the Soviet Union. Military jeeps and Arab policemen patrolled the streets. Armed sentries guarded the bridges over the Tigris River.

A year earlier the pro-British government was overthrown in a *coup d'etat* by Rashid Ali, who declared war on Britain in May. The British defeated the pro-German revolt when they dispatched Indian troops to Basra, and brought their army from Palestine to Baghdad. The Arab population was hostile and restive.

The sun was setting when I checked into Hotel Umayyan. It was a far cry from the general shabbiness and grayness of the city. The entrance was palatial, with two rows of palm trees and flowerbeds. I was impressed by the elegance and opulence of the place. The marble floor lobby crawled with liveried porters and military personnel. The front desk had a message for me from Captain James Patterson, our British Liaison Officer. He asked me to meet him at the bar at nine o'clock.

I went to my room on the second floor, washed up, and stretched leisurely on the bed. This was the first time I would sleep in a bed with a mattress and white sheets since that day on June 22nd in 1941 when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union. Bombs began to rain on the city of Lvov, where I was studying English Linguistics at the University. I marched out of the city with the retreating Soviet troops.

I closed my eyes. A kaleidoscope of scenes from the last few months crowded my mind: the long trek across the embattled Ukraine and Russia, with stop-overs in Kiev and Saratov; the back-breaking work as a lumberjack on the River Volga; the long journey south on trains; arrival in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, escaping from the train transporting prisoners and refugees, guarded by soldiers.

A warm night. I sit on a bench in a park near the railway station, and I can hear the muffled sound of human cries. Thousands of refugees camping on the platform of the station and on the streets around it. Mothers hugging their children, clutching their pitiful possessions, bundles of shabby clothing, wooden boxes, baskets and bags. Women, who have been robbed earlier in the evening, ailing and crying out for help that is not available. Total chaos.

My head and body itch. I'm covered with lice. I am hungry, and I have run out of money. Except for a little English-Polish dictionary in my pocket, I have nothing. When daylight comes I wash myself at the fountain in the park. I roam the streets, steal juicy grapes and tomatoes from stalls in a bazaar.

A blurry vision of lecture halls at the Tashkent University. Alexey Tolstoy, wearing an elegant suit, holding forth on Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Meeting him on my way out of the kitchen, with two pails of slop. The professor is indignant. "This is not a job for a student!" He doesn't know about hunger.

More war images– a giddy phantasmagoria of bombed cities: beautiful Warsaw crumbling into ruins, burning towns and villages as I march eastward. Flames, black smoke, the stench of rotting corpses, carcases of horses and cattle. The provincial town of Luts'k, where I spent my first seventeen years. The faces of my dear ones flitting by: Mother, twin brother Joseph, grandparents, uncles, aunt, cousins. A nightmarish vision of the medieval Lubart Castle in Luts'k, its moat filled with bodies. SS soldiers and Ukrainian militia men firing machine guns at unarmed men, women and children. Row after row. Bodies falling into the huge open grave, writhing. Bodies still heaving under a thin cover of earth. Is my mother in that grave, with other members of my family?

The quarantine camp of General Anders's Polish Army in Yang Youl, on the bank of a river in the Buchara region. You were transported to the other bank, where

transported to the other bank, where the army was being organized and equipped-- if you didn't drop dead and didn't show symptoms of typhoid after two weeks. I survived and was admitted. I volunteered to work at the hospital. I was back in the quarantine camp.

Frydek and Wilek– the two brothers who had enlisted as Catholics, both infected with typhoid. Couldn't do much for them. Wilek, the older brother was religious. When he realized he was dying, and they brought the priest to his bedside, he confessed that he was Jewish. They didn't get him a rabbi. They buried him in a field outside the camp. Two days later I saw an orderly giving an injection to Frydek. He was dead the following morning. When their sister Irene came to the hospital to look for them, she was told they died on the same day. They wouldn't tell her where their graves were. I realized then that they'd killed Frydek.

Irene's luminous, green eyes. A beautiful young girl's face. Delicate features, small nose and finely shaped lips, framed by a mass of dark brown hair–two thick tresses that fell on her back, down to her waist. Her sad story of flight from the native town of Tarnobrzeg, of being deported by the Soviets to Siberia, with her mother, two brothers and a married sister. Mother died as they were traveling south, and the two boys had to bury her in a shallow hole along the dirt road. Sister was in Tehran with her husband.

She told me about her stay at the Polish orphanage. Like her brothers, she was registered as a Catholic. But now she was going to Tehran where she hoped to make contact with the Jewish Agency.

"I'll see you in Jerusalem," she said with a wan smile, and her eyes grew misty.

"Definitely," I replied.

"Remember," Irene said, "my name is 'Gibor' not 'Giborski', as my brothers

and I declared to the Army."

I took her into my arms. She clung to me as if we had been lovers. I felt a great tenderness for her. I kissed her gently and she responded.

"Irene Gibor," I said, "I will find you wherever you are."

She smiled again, as we drew apart, and she walked toward the van that was taking her to the orphanage. She turned her head before she got into the vehicle and waved her hand at me. I stood there for a while, as if frozen, long after the van carrying her away had disappeared behind the gate of the camp, transfixed by the moment of our intimacy, so new to me, and so intoxicating that I felt drowsy. A strange immobility descended upon me, a dream-like indolence as I closed my eyes so I could imagine I the features of her face, the sound of her voice, the magic of her eyes. I savored the feel of her warm firm flesh. I kept whispering her name, repeating "We shall meet again, Irene," as if it were a religious mantra. I had lost the sense of time and place until jostled out of my reverie by the strident voices of my fellow soldiers. But the memory of this encounter with Irene was now firmly embedded in my brain. I would summon it again and again, and it would flash upon me, warming my soul, dispelling the clouds of despair that sometimes assailed my mind.

That day I asked for a transfer to the training camp across the river. My request was granted with unprecedented alacrity. They knew that I knew what they had done and were glad to get rid of me.

I got out of bed and relaxed in the comfortable, red leather armchair in front of the window. I could see the traffic, mostly military jeeps and trucks. I closed my eyes again and reflected on the day that passed. The trip from my army base in Khanaqin to Baghdad was uneventful. Not like the journey to Khanaqin from Pahlevi in Iran, when I was attacked in the train on the way to Iraq. I was lying in the upper bunk. Suddenly I felt a stinging pain in my face and chest. Two of my fellow Polish soldiers were paying their compliments to me by whipping me with belts. I leaped, knocking both of them to the ground, punching and clawing at their faces. I felt like an animal fighting for its life, lashing out at my attackers with a desperate fury. I must have done something right for within a few minutes I was left alone in the compartment. There was quite a bit of blood on my face, hands and arms, but I soon discovered that it was mostly my opponents'. My nose was bleeding, my face swollen and covered with welts and my arms and chest bruised. But the damage I inflicted on my comrades in arms was much greater. The two fled the compartment assisted by the third soldier who witnessed the incident from his upper bunk.

Sergeant Jan Skudnik made an appearance, and with his customary venom berated me, swearing profusely and promising dire punishment at the end of our journey. I told him I would report this attack to Captain Matuszewski. The sergeant backed off, and the matter was never mentioned again. He sent other soldiers to my compartment, and I wasn't bothered any more. But the experience only fortified my conviction that I could never feel safe in this anti-Semitic army of General Anders. And yet, it was precisely after the physical attack on me that my status in the regiment changed dramatically. Though I did not tell the captain about the incident, somehow he

was informed of what had happened, and obviously did not approve of it. My voluntary stint at the hospital impressed the captain, who personally welcomed my return from the plague-ridden compound, especially, I think, because I was the only man in the regiment who could speak English and act as translator when we reached our destination and joined the British Army in Iraq.

Who knows, I mused, they might even make me an officer though they refused to acknowledge the fact that in August 1939, a couple of weeks before the war, I had completed an officers' training course on the Prussian border. In that training camp I was also exposed to prejudice though without physical violence. And when it was my turn to command a company, I was obeyed. I did well in athletic events, winning the 100-meter competition, and the swim event as well. But I didn't make a single friend.

Now, after being subjected to abuse, ridicule and punishment, my erstwhile persecutors suddenly plied me with errands in Baghdad. I was no longer the dirty Jew and the contemptible kike. My duffel bag was bulging with dozens of broken timepieces and jewelry. I was now Andy, the fixer and provider. I felt like an owner of a small pawnshop. But this confidence, which I had earned by no action of mine, placed me on the horns of another dilemma. Not only was I going to desert the army, I was also going to be a thief, but not exactly a heroic one. I toyed with the idea of leaving my treasure at the hotel with instructions how to return the items to their rightful owners, but I needed the damn watches, pendants and the cash to obtain civilian clothes and to stay alive in Baghdad after leaving the army.

The Sergeant bestowed upon the four Jews (Moshe, Ira, Daron and me) the honor of cleaning or digging latrines on Saturdays. Why have we been thus chosen? I suppose that in Skudnik's perverse world view, we four represented the Chosen People, whom his Catholic Church dubbed Christ-killers. He therefore thought he was

fulfilling his duty as a good Pole and Catholic by inflicting punishment and humiliation upon us. Our fellow Polish soldiers in the regiment did not think there was anything wrong with the Sergeant's conduct. On the contrary, they cheered him on, and some of them would come up to visit us on the outskirts of the camp, where the open ditches we dug served as latrines. They would crack jokes as we did our work. The Sergeant frequently selected me and my friend Daron as targets of his spite. He would step on our boots and then claim we had not polished them; he would ask one of us to remove a boot, and declare that the sock was not clean; he would inspect our rifles, and determine they were not properly cleaned. On one hot day, he commanded me to stand at attention for an hour, aiming my rifle at the sky. A bunch of soldiers gathered around me, and mocked me. Another time, he decided to put me on display in front of the whole regiment at roll call in the main square of the training camp. He asked me to step forward, and then, pointing to the meadow in front of the square, barked his command," Run, on the double!" I took off like a professional sprinter, and Skudnik was forced to run after me, as he issued his next command, "On your ass, motherfucker!" I unbuckled my belt, dropped my pants, squatted, and crapped in front of the regiment, which exploded in laughter. I won the day, and Skudnik lost face. He waved me off, almost choking with rage, and I rejoined the ranks in the square.

I ignored Skudnik's frequent harangues at roll calls, delivered with the skill and gusto worthy of a Falstaff. But the banter of Falstaff and Prince Hal was playful. Skudnik's was a string of vile, anti-Semitic expletives, which described me as the seed of Satan, of a cursed race, and a Jewish whoreson. Once he thundered, "Why don't you fucking Jews go to Palestine!" "Maybe we shall," I said.

Little did he know of the plans Daron and I had made. We volunteered for service in General Anders's Army for two reasons. We knew that the army would leave the Soviet Union to join the British Army, and that we would be going to the Middle East war theater via Palestine– our desired destination. When we completed our training in Khanaqin, we learned that we were going to Europe, most likely to Italy. It was then that Daron and I decided to take the fate into our own hands by going AWOL, and finding our way to Palestine from Baghdad.

We used our one-day leave, which happened on the first day of the Jewish New Year, to locate a synagogue in Khanaqin. It was a small, white building with a sign in Arabic and Hebrew above the entrance, reading "Kehillat B'nei Israel." We sat in the back, and tried to follow the services, which were different from those we had known in Poland. We attracted curious glances from the congregation. A portly man with a thick, black moustache, came up to us. We told him, in a mixture of my English and Daron's Hebrew, that we were looking for a contact with some Zionist Jews in Baghdad. His face lit up with a smile when he understood our intent. He identified himself as Yitzhak Gaon, and invited us to dinner after services.

After many months of wandering across the Soviet Union, we enjoyed the festive mood and the warmth of a Jewish family, as we partook of the holiday fare and drank a ceremonial cup of sweet wine. Then we got down to business with our genial host, and discussed the plans for our escape. I was going to Baghdad in a few days, as a translator for our High Command, so Daron would have to get there on his own. Mr. Gaon undertook to buy a train ticket for him, and disguise him as an Arab peasant. We were to meet in the courtyard of Hotel Salim Rashid Ali, four days after my arrival in Baghdad, to give me an opportunity to meet Gaon's cousin Nissim, who would help me don civvies. We embraced our host as if he were a member of our

family. In a sense, he was.

I took a train to Baghdad without Captain Matuszewski, who was to follow me two or three days later. "Do your errands for the men, " he said, "and get acquainted with the English Liaison Officer. And don't get too drunk." When he saw the expression on my face, he added, "I forget, you people don't drink the way we do." I don't think he meant it as a compliment.

I would have liked to see Sergeant Skudnik's face when he discovered that two members of his Jewish "latrine crew" were missing. I would have enjoyed listening to his frantic imprecations. Ironically, my new-found reputation as an English translator caused a sea-change in Skudnik's attitude to us shortly before we decided to fly the coup. But Daron and I still slept in our tent, back to back, a loaded rifle between us. We felt the hatred of our fellow soldiers, as if it was a palpable thing that you could slice with a knife. And it wasn't only the prospect of being attacked by your fellow soldiers, the fear of getting a bullet or a bayonet in your back when we got to the front. It was my desire to serve with men I could trust, with whom I could share common values. This was impossible in the poisonous atmosphere of General Anders's Army.

There was one thing though I would miss after I left: the contact with the British, the opportunity to learn from them. My expertise in English was a gross exaggeration. Actually, I had but a smattering of English at the time, having studied the language for a month during my abortive summer session at the University of Lvov. I had begun working with a self-taught manual of English a year before, and made a partly successful attempt at reading Joseph Conrad in English. It was rather sporadic, as I marched eastward, and occasionally pored over the pages of *Heart of Darkness.* I had a tiny Polish-English dictionary, containing some 12,000 words. It became my

bible during my long, often arduous journeys over the immensity of the Soviet Union. I always carried it in my pocket, and perused it with an almost religious zeal, committing most of it to memory. This little, tattered, red volume was more important to me than Mao Tse-Tung's Little Red Book was to his ardent followers. It was the only thing I had with me from Poland. For all its preciousness, however, this opus measuring 1 ½ x 2 ½ inches, authored by Stanisław Goldman and published in Cracow in 1923, was not very helpful in my efforts to fathom Conrad's meanings. It was many months later, when I found myself in the distant and exotic city of Tashkent in Uzbekistan that I was able to lay my hands on a decent English-Russian dictionary. Even then my troubles were not over, for I often failed to understand the Russian equivalent of Conrad's language. I held on to the two books through the perilous march from Lvov across forests and fields. I lost my meager possessions during a Nazi bombing of the Kiev railway station, where I was waiting for a train to Saratov, but the slender Conrad volume and my little bible remained safe in my pockets. I kept them with me during my brief sojourn in Saratov, where my work as lumberjack was not very conducive to literary study.

Conrad read Shakespeare at odd moments aboard his sailing ships, and I struggled with his tale of Kurtz and Marlow, as I penetrated deeper and deeper the vastness of the Soviet Union, heading south. People clung to trains like flies, and often I traveled long distances, perched precariously on open platforms, sharing them with other refugees, wounded soldiers and escaped criminals. Food and water were scarce. During stops, people scavenged the area around the tracks for something to eat; they collected drops of hot water dripping from the steam engine. There were many fights, some fatal to one or more combatants, who were left to rot in the blazing sun.Through all this I wrestled with Marlow's account of his journey into the heart

of impenetrable darkness, secretly grateful to Conrad for having provided me with a means of temporary escape from the problems of survival and from thoughts of my family left behind at the mercy of Hitler's henchmen. Marlow was trying to find Kurtz, and then to fathom the mystery of his degradation, and of his own affinity with him. I was trying to unfold the story by mastering its language. I had read it in Polish, so I knew the characters and the events. I plodded on, discovering the meaning of one word after another as if each were an epiphany.

Reading Conrad was for me a voyage into strange and largely uncharted regions. I would stare at a page with the kind of bafflement his heroes experienced when they struggled with the fury of the ocean or the depths of man's iniquity. Conrad's skein of ironies eluded me, for most of my energies went into the process of simply unraveling the meaning of each sentence and paragraph. I read the final pages of *Heart of Darkness* in a hospital room in Tashkent. There was an epidemic of typhoid in the city, and people were dying daily by the hundreds, of disease or starvation. The hospital was short of food and medical supplies. The nurses stole from pitiful rations ladled out to patients; more than half of them would not survive. The sick and the dying lay on the floor of a dingy hall, waiting to be admitted. They sprawled on the sidewalks and the lawns in front of the hospital compound. Some of the discharged patients were too weak to go anywhere. They wandered about the grounds and invariably collapsed. A few, who lived a day or two, were re-admitted to the hospital.

I was attending an old, emaciated Russian woman, burning up with fever. I decided to keep watch over her for the rest of the night. She dozed off intermittently as I was reading about Marlow's vision of Kurtz on his stretcher. This hospital had run out of stretchers; in fact, it had run out of just about everything except a

seemingly endless supply of patients ravaged by illness and hunger.

Her name was Katya. She opened her eyes and watched me for a while.

"You readin' up a storm," she said hoarsely. "What's all about?"

She was a simple woman, and I wasn't going to tell her about "the heart of a conquering darkness" or "the tempestuous anguish" of Kurtz's soul, although I was fascinated by Conrad's style.

"It's about a fellow who went wild in the African jungle," I said evasively.

"What did he do?" "He became a native chief, collected ivory, killed some people, probably ate some, too." "How many did he eat?" "The book doesn't say."

Katya was not impressed. She emitted a snort of contempt.

"You shouldda seen what I seen when I was a little girl... my own uncle waiting in the yard for me... with an axe... he was one hungry man, he was."

Katya was not endowed with Kurtz's splendid eloquence, but her tale of cannibalism in rural Russia in the days of Stalin's forced collectivization probably spoiled the ending of the novel for me. Her stoic acceptance of pain and suffering was so different from the Intended's saving illusion. Old Katya had no illusions whatsoever, and no regrets. She thought she was a lucky woman. She died that morning– without a sigh. I wondered how Marlow would have described her final passage, as they carried her out like a sack of potatoes, and dumped her onto a truck filled to the brim with the corpses of men, women and children, who had expired during the night. It was otherwise with the unfortunate dreamer from the *Patna,* whose fate began to dog my steps. After I was done with *Heart of Darkness,* I was able to spend a few months at the University of Tashkent, where I renewed my acquaintance with Lord Jim–this time in English. But, once more, my contacts with him turned out to be somewhat sporadic. First I was dispatched with other students

to a collective farm as a cotton picker. The back-breaking work from four o'clock in the morning with only a bowl of soup at the end of the day did not leave much desire for anything but food and rest. But I continued to dip into *Lord Jim* (still in English), which I obtained with great effort from the university library. I had to fill out a number of forms to "prove" my need for a novel in a foreign language. They were cautious, I guess. Maybe they thought that my perusal of a foreign book might adversely affect the war effort. I had long given up any attempt to understand the intricate paranoia of Soviet officials.

I never returned the book to the library. I lost it at the quarantine camp at Yang Youl, in the Buchara region. The university librarian was probably filing reports of the missing book, with copies to the secret police. Before the book disappeared, however, I had transcribed the concluding words of the thirteenth chapter on a piece of paper, which I slipped into my little dictionary. The passage appealed to me: "The night swallowed his form. He was a horrible bungler. Horrible. I heard the quick crunch-crunch of the gravel under his boots. He was running. Absolutely running, with nowhere to go. And he was not yet four-and twenty." I had a problem with the word *bungler.*

Later in the evening Captain Patterson enlightened me, as we were drinking whisky. His flaming red moustache quivered in ill-concealed amusement when I asked him, "What is as *bungler*?" He must have assumed that someone had applied the epithet to me, for his manner was not amiable. "A bungler, dear chap," he said, pronouncing the word as if were a key word in a soliloquy by Hamlet, "is a botcher." I have always been a contentious critter so I protested vigorously, "And what is a botcher?" "A bloke," said Patterson, "who makes a mess of things." My colloquial English was still too limited for I countered with, "Isn't 'mess' a meal with the British

army?" My Englishman was a patient man, and he explained the meaning of the word until I grasped it. Now I could ponder the relevance of the quotation to my circumstances. Though I had not yet done anything to qualify as a "horrible bungler," I could well understand Jim's predicament. I too was young, only twenty-one, and running from city to city, from one battlefront to another, never knowing what the next day would bring, cut off from my family, trying to stay alive among strangers in a strange land. And here I was, spending the first day in Baghdad, planning my escape from the Anders's Army, and thus being on the run again.

Jim leaped from his ship in a moment of panic, deserting his duty as a seaman, then sought punishment for his transgression, and spent the rest of his days trying to redeem his lost honor. Was I going to lose my honor by going AWOL? I never swore allegiance to this army. They never wanted me in the first place. They admitted four Jews only, a token presence, so they could claim the army was not discriminating against us. Four out of several hundred boys who wanted to join.

I am standing in front of a large mirror on the dresser. The man staring back at me is of an athletic frame, draped in a British military uniform with shoulder badges reading "Poland." I smile at my own reflection, rather pleased with my neat appearance and my dimpled, tanned face. "Are you really going to do it?" I ask the soldier in the mirror. "Are you going to shed this uniform and become a hunted man, in the midst of a war, in this colorful but forbidding city of Baghdad?"

I feel sorry I shall lose my Englishman. It's ludicrous. Patterson is probably laughing behind my back. I am not anxious to see the sarcastic grin, lurking beneath his fiery moustache. He is not important. There will be plenty of Englishmen in Palestine... when I get there. *If* I and Daron get there, I correct myself, as new doubts creep into my mind.

I am going to give up the relative security of Anders's Army, now enhanced by my new responsibility as translator and close contacts with the officers. If they catch me I could be hanged or executed by a firing squad. But Daron and I had discussed this possibility before we made our decision, and we were prepared to take this risk for the chance, however slim, to reach Palestine. Still, those nagging questions. Suppose I don't find Gaon's cousin? Suppose I do locate Nissim, but he is unable to provide me with muftis? And even if this is accomplished, what next? Where do we go from here? Gaon gave us the name of a Dr. Rosenfeld as a contact man but no address. That was all. Suddenly I understand that what lies ahead is utterly unpredictable.

I pace the room like a caged animal. If we reach Palestine... but we must. We will find a way. Palestine... the Holy Land, *Eretz Yisrael*. Jerusalem, the City of Gold, where I would meet my Irene. A line from Goethe's poem pops out of nowhere: *Kennst Du das Land wo die Zitrohnen blüh'n, die Goldorangen...* " I remember the packages we used to get from my aunt Gonya who lived in Palestine, and owned an orange grove in Kfar-Saba. The aroma of those golden oranges, as I take off the thin paper wrappers, stamped "Jaffa Oranges." And I see khaki-clad young pioneers toiling lush orange groves.

No, I assure myself. What I am about to do is not abandoning a ship, and leaving hundreds of pilgrims to their fate. General Anders's Army will not suffer because a couple of soldiers are missing. There's no panic in my decision. I am leaving deliberately because I want to be free of their consuming hatred, just as I wanted to be free of the Soviet regime, which trampled human dignity and destroyed millions of its own citizens. I must seize this chance, no matter how tenuous, to be with my own people.

Like Ali Baba, I too was a woodcutter, and now I am a thief as well. But I don't

have his magic password *Sesame* to enter a secure cave. What I and Daron have is a destination summed up in two words, which will serve as our magic password: *Eretz Yisrael.* What we have is an abiding faith, a profound conviction that we will stake out a new destiny in the ancient land of our forefathers.

Tomorrow is the beginning of yet another journey. I look out the window. The street appears dark and ominous. I need a good night's sleep.

3

I was roused from a deep sleep by staccato sounds coming from the window. I rubbed my eyes, looked at the patch of cloudless sky. A truck backfiring, I thought. I remembered that fateful day when I was awakened by similar noises.

I'm in Warsaw, in my mother's apartment on the fifth floor, at 64 Zelazna Street. The day is September 1, 1939. From my bed I see puffs of smoke blooming like little black flowers in the blue sky. Suddenly I understand. My God, it's AA flak. Before I can articulate the word "WAR," the whole building shakes violently, after a bomb explodes outside, shattering all the windows.

I leap out of my bed, cutting my feet on the broken glass as I run to the window. The building across from ours has collapsed into a smoking heap of rubble. A muffled chorus of human voices, screaming, crying, rises from the wounded street.

I must shake off this memory, at least for now. I've got to erase these images of ruin and destruction, and think of today. I got out of bed, dressed and went down to the restaurant, to have breakfast with Captain Patterson.

"Ah, Mr. Bard," he greeted me with a friendly smile. "Had a good night's sleep?"

"Yes. This hotel beats the tent in the Khanaqin camp."

I sat down at his table and ordered fried eggs, sausage and coffee, a meal I could only dream about during the past year.

"You're on leave for the next couple of days, aren't you?"

"Yes. I have to run a few errands for my comrades in Khanaqin."

"Your captain told me. Well, if you have any spare time, see the museum at

Abu Nuwas Street. They have some great exhibits, especially the ancient inscriptions of Hammurabi."

"Who was Hammurabi?"

"A Babylonian king... eighteenth century B.C. This street also has good cafes and restaurants. Some of the cafes are like our pubs, except they don't have our beer. Ask for the local delicacy *masguf."*

"What's that?"

"Fish from Tigris, roasted over an open fire. As you put it, it beats our English fish and chips."

"I'll try it," I said, thinking, The last thing I'll do today is pub crawling or sightseeing. If he knew what I was up to! Captain Patterson was genuinely concerned with my having a god time, for he offered another suggestion.

"If you aren't in the mood for holy sites or food, go to Madam Fatima's establishment. Best little whorehouse in Baghdad."

"Well..." I said uncertainly.

"Don't be embarrassed," Captain Patterson chuckled. "We all need it, old chap. Madam Fatima gives discounts to men in uniform. All taxi drivers know her place."

When I recall the scene so many years after it happened, I see this fiercely mustachioed officer through the prism of my Shakespearean associations. "Then a soldier,/ Full of strange oaths and bearded like a pard..." Indeed, his bristling moustaches were like the panther's or leopard's feelers. As he rose to say good bye, I saluted him. He waved his hand in protest, as if to say that all that formal nonsense was not necessary between friends. Yes, I was going to miss that Englishman of mine whom I would never see again. I wondered what he'd say to Captain Matuszewski after my disappearance. Probably, "Here's a pretty kettle of fish," or something like

that. I could imagine what fulminations the Polish officer would spout, and how incomprehensible they would sound to my Englishman.

I left the hotel after breakfast, carrying my duffel bag. I took out the cigarette pack, on which Mr. Gaon had scribbled the address of his cousin Nissim. "125 Al Amin St., near Zuveyda Square," I read. He gave me a quizzical look.

"That's in Dar al-Yahud. You sure you wan' to go there?" he asked, his little black eyes glinting with suspicion. His forehead turned into a troubled furrow, as he twirled his thick moustache.

"Yes, I know it's the Jewish Quarter," I said. "Do you know how to get there?"

"*Ayvah."* Yes, I know. No worry." He returned the cigarette pack to me, and I put it in my pocket. "Drive along the Abu Nuwas Street," I said.

The driver cruised down Rashid Street, then along Khalid Ibn Al-Walid Street, to show me some other swanky hotels. After we passed the museum, he turned west. We came to a small bridge; he stopped and pointed ahead.

"The bridge, it is called 'Quantarat al-Yahud', the bridge of the Jews. Not far from here, about 5 km west, is the tomb of Nabi Yusha, on the Euphrates road."

"Yusha?"

"Kohen Yusha or Joshua, son of Josedech, the high priest of the Jews– a long time ago."

I was impressed. Having guessed my ethnic identity, this Arab driver deigned to assume the role of a guide. And, like my favorite Englishman, he too wanted me to be an accidental tourist. All I wanted was to find Nissim, and to get rid of my uniform.

"You don't want to see Nabi Yusha?"

"No."

He drove through narrow alleys, barely wide enough for one car. He pulled up in front of a two-story brick house. A young woman stepped out on the veranda. She wore a long, grey skirt, a white blouse and a white kerchief on her head. She came forward. Her face registered fear. She folded her arms on her chest, and watched us anxiously. I got out of the car.

"Wait for me," I said to the driver, and went up to the veranda.

"I am looking for Nissim," I said to the woman.

"He not here," she said.

"I come from Mr. Gaon." Her face lit up.

"Oh, yes , I know cousin Yitzhak."

"When do you expect Nissim?

"Tomorrow or a day after. He has business in Basra."

"Tell him it's important," I whispered, so the taxi driver would not hear me. She nodded.

I was in a quandary. I couldn't go back to Hotel Umayyan, where I could run into Captain Patterson. And suppose Captain Matuszewski changed his mind and came to Baghdad today. It was too risky. I needed time to think.

"Take me back to Abu Nuwas street," I said to the taxi driver.

I told him to let me off in front of a large, imposing building with two marble columns at the top of the stairs. Uniformed guards wielding sten guns stood rigidly on each side of the massive, bronze door. I started going up the stairs, to give the taxi driver the impression that I was going to some office. As soon as he drove away, I came down the stairs. The guards watched me impassively.

I wandered in the business district for hours, my duffel bag slung over my shoulder, pretending to window shop. But though I paused to watch one display of

goods after another, I saw nothing. I was preoccupied with my failure to meet Nissim. What was I going to do tomorrow if he failed to return from Basra? His young wife wouldn't dream of offering shelter to a strange soldier simply because he had mentioned the name of her husband's cousin. And where should I spend the night? I was not to go to the Hotel Salim Rashid Ali until I had donned civvies. It was not a place for men in uniform.

Then it occurred to me that the safest place for me, till Nissim came back, was Madam Fatima's establishment. I waited at the curb till I was able to hail a cab.

"Where?" the taxi driver asked.

"Madam Fatima's," I said.

The driver grinned, and grunted approval.

I leaned back in my seat. Suddenly desire stirred in my loins. The last time I got laid was in Tashkent, a couple of months before I left for Buchara, to join General Anders's Polish Army. Sonya, the chief cook at the Tashkent Hospital, was the only woman I had sex with during my entire stay in the Soviet Union. I had been sent to the hospital by the University of Tashkent Student Employment Department. They knew that the 200-ruble student stipend was too pitiful to be taken seriously. In fact, it was the price of one loaf of bread on the black market. The 400-gram daily ration, which one could obtain by standing in line for hours in the few distribution centers, was barely sufficient for survival, if one could supplement it with other food stuffs. So when some charitable soul in that Department offered me a job in the hospital kitchen, I grabbed it for its promise of food.

It was not the most romantic affair. We would do it right on the large kitchen table, still reeking of lard. Sonya was a large woman, with a ruddy peasant's face, ample breasts and hips. Her husband had been away in the army for more than a year,

and at the age of thirty-five she needed a man. She took a liking to me at once, and was not bashful about her intentions. After my 12-hour shift was over at five o'clock, and the kitchen would close for the day, she'd come back, open the lock on the refrigerator, and proceed to feed me all kinds of morsels, a slice of beef or bacon, a piece of cheese or a dumpling stuffed with mushrooms. I felt like a pampered dog, a bit humiliated, but I was always hungry in those days, so I did what she expected of me. She would flash a genial smile at me, and coo in her husky, stentorian voice, "Up we go, Andriusha, darling!" It sounded more like a command than an amorous invitation, but then Sonya was used to giving orders and being obeyed. Before climbing onto the table, she would produce a silvery canteen of vodka, take a slug and offer it to me.

She wore a woolen frock, which had buttons at the front. She would methodically unbutton it, slip her bra above her breasts, slide her crude, cotton panties on the floor, mount the greasy kitchen table, and lie on her back, her legs open wide, as if she were ready for an obstetrician. I would drop my pants and underwear, climb on top of her, kiss her perfunctorily, and pump dutifully, as best I could. Sonya moaned and squealed, like a pig about to be slaughtered. When I came, and had given her an orgasm, she would envelop me in a crushing hug.

I had been warned by a fellow traveler on the train heading south from Saratov, "Just you wait! You'll live but you'll not want to fuck." He was an escaped convict, and he knew a lot about the effects of malnutrition or downright starvation on a man's libido. He was prophetic. Despite numerous opportunities, I remained chaste during my travels. I simply had no desire for women. When I didn't agonize over the fate of my family left behind under Nazi occupation, I fantasized about food, picturing sumptuous feasts in my imagination. Only when Sonya began to augment my starvation diet with her goodies, could I muster an erection.

starvation diet with her goodies, could I muster an erection.

My mistress didn't quite realize the rigors of my new-found, exalted title of *istopnik,* or stoker. My task was to light up six huge vats in the kitchen, and to keep them boiling. She had only one direction for me, issued in a tone befitting a general ordering his troops to attack the enemy: DON'T LET THE FIRE GO OUT! This was easier said than done. There was no coal for the furnaces, and there were no matches. The only available fuel was a local tree called *saksaul,* so hard that you couldn't chop off a branch with an ax or a saw. Gregor, the stoker on the other shift, a lame, middle-aged man, taught me the trick of lifting each tree at its roots, and smashing it against the concrete surface of the yard until I had a number of small branches, which could be shoved into the furnace. The central building in the hospital compound had what we used to call "an eternal fire," a large stove which heated the main hallway, and was tended round the clock. I would collect some glowing embers from the stove in my shovel, and carry them to my kitchen, where I would use them to start the fire under my vats. To begin my job at 5 a.m., I had to be at the hospital an hour earlier but no transportation was available in the wee hours of the morning. So I would leave the University dormitory at 10 p.m. on the preceding day, and arrive at the hospital compound between 11 and 12 p.m. Riding the tramcar at night was an unsettling experience. Hordes of lugubrious waifs huddled in little groups, their faces wan from hunger, their eyes vacant, their bodies emaciated. Nobody paid any attention to those abandoned orphans any more than to the thousands of refugees, who had fled the cities in the north and west, and were now roaming the streets of sunny Tashkent, crowding together at railway station platforms, on park benches and public squares. As I set out every other night for the trip in the tramcar clanging its way toward the hospital, I dreaded the encounter with those children, for I had

nothing to offer them. And when I looked at them, I thought of my twin brother Joseph, wondering whether he too was now homeless, looking for food and shelter. I worried about my mother, my grandparents and the rest of the family, left behind in the town of Luts'k in the Ukraine. Were they still alive?

My good-natured Sonya didn't know how I spent the night before I assumed my duties as stoker. I could not use the table in the kitchen, which the hospital guard unlocked before five o'clock, so I had to improvise. I used the bottom of a clothes cabinet in the hallway for the upper part of my body, and stretched my legs on a wooden crate, covering myself with some rags. This was not a very comfortable bed, but it kept me off the cold and damp concrete floor. It would have been wonderful, I mused, had I been able to sleep on top of my Sonya, who was warm and soft, rather than shiver and toss in my makeshift sleeping structure. But she wouldn't have let me have my rest, for she was a demanding lover. I was surprised that I had enough strength to satisfy her, after a brief sleep and a long day of hard work. I give her credit for having made me feel like a man again.

Alas, my affair with Sonichka, as I began to call her, lasted less than two months. Without warning, I was suddenly transferred to the main hospital compound, and assigned the duty of a male nurse in the typhoid section. I surmised that one of the other women in the kitchen must have reported my liaison with her to Dr. Matvey Kuraev, a malicious, little man. Since he was in charge of ordering and receiving all food supplies, he must have resented her dipping into his treasure.

My reveries about Sonya came to an end as the taxi stopped in front of a gaudy building. The walls of this two-story structure were lined with multicolored tiles: yellow, red, blue and orange. It looked like a house in a fairy tale. Standing on the veranda, decorated with bright red streamers, was a burly, young man in a long, white

cloak, a yellow sash girding his waist. His head cloth was bound with a scarlet and gold cord. His thick moustache and a well-trimmed goatee gave him a distinguished look. His hands fiddled with the jeweled handle of a curved dagger tucked into his sash. He stepped forward, and ushered me into a hallway lit by an ornate brass lamp.

I was greeted by Madam Fatima, an attractive woman in her forties, with heavy make-up on her face, and a mane of black hair flowing down her shoulders. A multicolored silk robe draped her corpulent figure.

"Good evening, sir," she addressed me, "this is your first visit to our establishment, isn't it?" Her English, though accented, was that of a cultivated person. She took my hand and led me into a large parlor, furnished with plush red sofas, easy chairs and brass tray that served as coffee tables.

"Yes," I said, a bit flustered, for I have never been addressed so deferentially before, and as I was no rake, I felt like a little boy being chaperoned by his mother.

"Let me have your bag, sir," Madam Fatima said, "don't you worry, I'll put it in your room. Would you like a drink?"

"Whisky and soda," I said nonchalantly, as if visits to bordellos were routine stuff for me, and added," I'd like to get a room for the night." Madam Fatima frowned.

"We usually don't do that... but, of course, it can be arranged, if you're willing to spend an extra 250 fils."

"Okay," I said, forking over a dinar to her. She smiled, and deposited the silver coin in her plump bosom. She went to the bar, tended by a huge, barrel-chested man sporting a handle-bar moustache. He walked with the swagger of a wrestler, and, like the guard outside, also wore a dagger on his red sash. Probably doubles as a bouncer, I thought, as he handed me my glass. Two British soldiers, sitting at a table were

lining up a dozen bottles of beer.

As I sank into a leather chair, Madam Fatima clapped her hands, and to my astonishment, seven curvaceous women came in through a curtain made of glass beads that tinkled softly with each entry. Bare midriffs were *de rigeur.* They wore colorful, diaphanous skirts and scarves– truly a motley crew, which formed a line, arranging themselves according to their height.

"Choose," Madam Fatima said.

I rose and slowly walked past the line-up with a studied air of indifference, though my heart was thumping, and I had a problem balancing the drink in my hand. Madam Fatima was right behind me, as if I were an officer reviewing an honor guard, and she my adjutant. From the corner of the room came the sound of a plaintive Arab tune, sung by a deep male voice. The seven beauties swayed their hips rhythmically. Belly dancers, I thought, though I had never seen one before, and I am like a slave trader of old, buying human flesh. I looked them over, my eyes going from head to foot. The smallest of this motley crew, standing on the extreme right, appealed to me. It wasn't only her slender, lithe body, that I liked. I was her striking, dark eyes. She smiled at me in a girlish sort of way, as she wiggled her buttocks. Madam Fatima was watching me closely.

"You have chosen, I see," she said. "Her name is Odile. Take her upstairs, room number five." She handed my bag to Odile, who led the way. I followed her, still carrying my glass, feeling awkward and aroused by the sensual movement of her hips. She opened the door to our room, sparsely furnished with a low bed, covered with a pink sheet, a wash basin and a jug of water on a round table. She put my duffel bag in the corner.

Odile kissed me. Witchcraft in your lips. The words of the victorious Henry

wooing his royal Kate, who was so reluctant to grant this favor. Odile was something else. Her professional skill belied her youthful looks. She took charge, sensing at once my limited experience in matters of sex.

Among the things Odile taught me that night was the difference between riding and being ridden. She left me in a state of euphoria, after an hour or so, and went down to service other men. I did not think of my precarious situation. I did not think of Daron or Nissim. Like Henry the Fifth's wretched slave, I slept soundly in Elysium all night.

4

The night was dispersed by bright shafts of light that played about my face. A slight breeze caressed my naked body as I lay, half-awake, the fragrance of Odile still lingering in the room. From the open window came a strange and incomprehensible cackle of fowl and female voices, mingled with the cooing of pigeons. I got out of bed and walked to the window. I'll be damned, I chuckled. Those whores of Madam Fatima ran a little farm in the courtyard of the house. A couple of them were watering neat rows of tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and other vegetables that grew in the shade of several orange and lemon trees. Odile, now clad in a long, white smock, was feeding chickens. She looked quite different in daylight, a regular peasant girl--not at all like the lady of the night who had entertained me some hours ago.

I returned to my bed but could not go back to sleep. I closed my eyes. Irene's image appeared to me. I wondered whether I had selected Odile because her girlish aspect reminded me of Irene. No, no, I argued against this notion. I came to Madam Fatima's place for shelter and some physical release. Nothing more. Odile meant nothing to me. But Irene... my lovely, sad-eyed Irene– she belonged in another level of existence. I wanted to adore and cherish her. I yearned for her but in a different way. I wanted to kiss her lips, to hold her close. I did not fantasize about having sex with her. To link her with Odile in any way was a desecration of a pure and innocent girl.

I got dressed, and went down to the parlor. Madam Fatima had prepared breakfast for me: a cup of strong, sweet Turkish coffee and a warm pita. She had also summoned a taxi, which was waiting for me outside. She was a brick, as Major Patterson would have said.

"You'll come back, no? " Madam Fatima said, with a broad, friendly smile.

" You bet!" I lied glibly.

I gave Nissim's address to the taxi driver, which again elicited a suspicious glance from him, but this guy did not engage me in conversation. He had no trouble finding the place. I paid him, and mounted the stairs to Nissim's veranda. I knocked on the door. There was no response. I looked through the curtained window of the entrance door. Nobody was home. I sat in the wicker chair, thinking of my options. What am I going to do if Nissim does not show up? I cannot wander the streets of Baghdad in this uniform, not for long, anyway. But wander the streets I did, after waiting for an hour.

I played the part of the tourist, as Captain Patterson had suggested. I went to the museum at Abu Nuwas Street, and saw the Hammurabi inscriptions and lots of exhibits of ancient weapons, but I could not concentrate. At the back of my mind was the nagging doubt about Nissim. It stayed with me as I next visited the Baghdad Mosque. As I stood at the entrance, without taking off my boots, I thought of the first time I had entered a Catholic church in my home town of Lut'sk. It was the same sense of awe and amazement. The Arabs praying on their knees, the Poles kneeling before the altar and the large statue of Christ on the cross– how different they were from the pious Jews in the synagogue, which I visited with my grandfather as a child! The Jews, each man with a tallith, the prayer shawl, draped around his shoulder or covering his head, as he swayed in prayer, or bowed before the Torah being carried before the congregation, touching it with the tallith and then kissing it. Different, yes, but the devotion was the same. I felt sorry that I had not been reared as an observant man. I had not been inside a house of worship since I was thirteen.

I decided to find a synagogue. I walked about the city, eventually finding my

way back to the Jewish district. I located the hotel Salim Rashid Ali, where I was supposed to check in, at the intersection of Suk El Shura and Haroun El Rashid street. I noted the Town Clock Tower in front of the building. The bazaar El Shura was crowded. I made my way from stall to stall, as some of the more aggressive merchants hustled me and urged me to buy their goods. I was attracting too much attention. I went in the direction of Nissim's house. I found a synagogue in one alley, a small building with the Star of David on the entrance door. It was locked. A bearded man approached me. I asked him how I could get inside. He responded in Arabic.

I walked away. I decided to go back to Nissim before it got dark. This time I found his wife at home. "He be here tomorrow, for sure," she said. But as before, she did not invite me in. I went back to Madam Fatima's.

The ritual of last night was repeated, except that Odile was not in the line-up. She was busy with a customer. Only four women were available. I picked Leila, a statuesque woman with reddish hair and fair skin. She did not look like an Arab at all. Leila proved as competent as Odile, but then I was not a demanding lover.

I had paid Madam Fatima for another night's lodging, and was glad to be left alone in the room. I was not the mood for more sex. I wanted to rest after the many hours of walking. I tried to think about my situation, but no new ideas came to me. There was nothing I could do but wait for the morning and go back to Nissim.

As I grew drowsy, Irene's face appeared, hovering over me. Her eyes were not as sorrowful as when I saw her first. Her lips were parted with a hint of a smile. "Irene," I whispered, "my sweet Irene."

5

"One of your compatriots is here," Madam Fatima said, as I was having coffee in the morning. "A Polish colonel. I told him about you."

"Oh?" I said, trying to hide my apprehension.

"The colonel said Polish soldiers were not allowed in Baghdad. He wanted to see you after he's finished upstairs."

"Sure," I said, "I'll be back in a couple of hours. I have some business in town."

"I'll tell him," Madam Fatima said, with a twinkle in her eye. I knew she did not believe me, but she was no snitch. She wasn't going to get involved. I also realized at that moment that this bordello could no longer be my refuge.

I breathed a sigh of relief when the taxi pulled up in front of Madam Fatima's establishment, and I was off to the Jewish Quarter. This time I had better luck. Nissim had returned from Basra, and was waiting for me.

He was a pleasant-looking man in his mid-thirties, a short, heavy-set fellow with a ready smile. We hit it off from the moment I opened my duffel bag, and spilled its contents onto the dining room table. Nissim sold and bought previously owned goods, mostly jewelry, watches and clothing. He sorted my hoard meticulously, separating watches from trinkets.

"You got a couple of good items," Nissim said, "but most of it is junk. It'll be expensive to fix them. How much you want for the lot?"

"I don't know. Whatever you think it's worth. I need some decent clothes. You keep all the stuff, my uniform and the boots. I'll just take my shaving kit and my little dictionary."

"I'll give you five dinars." Nissim said. He reached into his pocket and handed over five silver coins. "I have just what you want: an English gentleman's outfit. Beautiful white suit, Egyptian cotton, with hat and white shoes. First class. It's in my storage room. Come, I'll show you."

He led me to a room in the back of the house, with shelves from the floor to the ceiling, all filled with merchandise. There was also a clothes rack, from which he removed the English gentleman's white suit, a white shirt, green tie with matching green handkerchief, white shoes, white socks , a wide-brimmed white hat and a cane. We went back to the living room.

"I want to shave off my moustache," I said, removing my shaving kit from the pile on the dining table. Carrying the clothes Nissim took me to the bathroom, which had a sink, a table with a jug of water and a basin. There was a mirror on the wall. I took off my uniform and boots. Then I shaved off my moustache and put on the white suit. I put my precious little dictionary in my pocket, and added Nissim's five dinars to the four dinars left after my stay at Madam Fatima's.

"Jacta est alea," I thought , looking at my changed face in the mirror. There's no turning back now. "Is that really me? Am I capable of pulling it off? " I felt a tingling excitement all over my body, looking at the smiling face in the mirror, the young stranger showing off his dimples. Nissim was standing behind me, admiring my transformation. I put on the white hat. He handed the cane to me.

"With this you look like a perfect Englishman," Nissim said, "You'll be invisible to the police."

Like Lord Jim, when he worked as ship-chandler's water-clerk, I was now "appareled in immaculate white from shoes to hat."

"The shoes are too tight," I said, "but everything else is fine."

"This is the largest pair I have."

Nissim's wife called us for coffee. We sat at the dining table, now cleared of my loot. She placed a large brass tray with little white cups, a jug of coffee and a plate with cookies. We drank the coffee.

"Try Sarah's cookies," Nissim said, "they're very good."

I ate a cookie.

"You go to Palestine?" Sarah asked.

"I hope to," I said, "that's why I had to change my appearance. I am expecting my buddy from the Polish Army to join me here. Yitzhak Gaon was going to help him get to Baghdad by train. Our friends in Khanaqin suggested that we contact a Dr. Rosenfeld. Do you know how I can find him?"

"I don't know any Dr. Rosenfeld," Nissim said, "I'm not active in the Zionist movement like Yitzhak. We must be very careful. I've been in trouble with police before. Sarah tells me that a couple of neighbors have already been asking questions about the soldier on our veranda. Everybody's scared after the pogrom last year. The Moslems killed a hundred eighty five Jews. They looted houses, raped some women. These are dangerous times."

"Thanks for the clothes and the coffee," I said. "Do you have a bag for my shaving kit?" "I'll give you the Englishman's attaché case Nissim said. He went to the storage room and brought a leather case. I opened it. There was a book inside. Its cover was dark blue, with a title imprinted in gold letters: "YOUTH by Joseph Conrad." Below the title was a sketch depicting a sailing ship. I opened the book. It contained two other stories in addition to "Youth:" "Heart of Darkness" and "The End of the Tether." Apparently, the owner of the suit, whose drinking or gambling habits most likely led to the sale of his white suit, shared my interest in Conrad,

"You want the book?" Nissim asked. I nodded.

Once again Conrad intruded into my life with the vision of the demented Kurtz and the questing Marlow. When Lord Jim prepared for his voyage to the distant and mysterious Patusan, he took a volume of Shakespeare's works with him. Best thing to cheer up a fellow, he thought. And here I was getting ready for my passage to the Holy Land, possibly a journey to the country from which no traveler returns, carrying the tale of the mad Kurtz to cheer me up. Perhaps the other two stories in the Conrad book might prove more uplifting. But this was no time to dwell on the significance of my new acquisition.

"One more thing," I said, "can you introduce me to some Jewish community leaders?"

"Perhaps you should go to the Chief Rabbi Khadoorie," Nissim suggested.

"How do I find him?"

"He lives not far from the hotel you mentioned. Turn left into El Kestel Street. Then walk some 200 meters, and you will see a large white house on the right side." I shook hands with Sarah and Nissim.. They both stood on the veranda and watched me as I walked away.

Hotel Salim Rashid Ali was a three-story circular building, with balconies on the second and third stories overlooking a large courtyard. Several benches stood around a fountain in the center. A couple of donkeys were tied to posts near the entrance gate. The rooms were sparsely furnished, each with two narrow beds, a table with a jug of water and a couple of chairs. The hotel's clientele were traders and commercial travelers, who used the rooms to store the goods they purchased in the city.

Yousuf, the hotel's owner, beamed at me when I told him that Yitzhak Golan had recommended his place. He was a tall man in his fifties, with a shock of gray hair.

"I am expecting a friend to join me today or tomorrow. Can he stay with me?" I said.

"Sure thing," Yousuf said, "be careful, there are spies everywhere."

I went to my room on the second floor. I took off my jacket and my shoes. My toes were sore. I stuck my fists into the shoes in a futile effort to expand their size. Then I lay on one of the beds, the attaché case with all my earthly possessions resting on the floor. I tried to come up with a plan of action. Should I go to the Chief Rabbi or start looking for Dr. Rosenfeld before Daron arrives from Khanaqin? I decided to wait for my friend, whose knowledge of Hebrew might be helpful in our meeting with the Rabbi. After a while, I got up, put on the jacket and shoes, took out the Conrad book, and went to the lobby. I bought a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of beer. I sat on a bench in the courtyard, facing the Town Clock Tower. It was half past eleven. I lit up, inhaled the smoke, and began to read Conrad's "Youth."

At three o'clock I finished reading the story. I identified with Marlow's sense of exultation. I too was young and in danger. I became aware of the uncanny resonance of Marlow's adventure to my and Daron's scheme. Marlow's ship was called "Judea," with the motto "Judea Do or Die" engraved on her rusty hulk. We were headed for the land once called Judea, and ours was a "Do or Die" kind of escapade. Was the fate of Marlow's ship a prophetic omen? His "Judea" first immobilized by leaks, then set ablaze by her smouldering cargo of coal, was a doomed ship. Yet Marlow, commanding a boat with a crew of two, gloried in his experience after reaching the Eastern port ahead of the other boats.

My meditation was interrupted by a voice calling my name. The call came from the third floor balcony. A ragged Arab peasant was leaning over the balustrade, gesturing in my direction.

"Hey, Andy!" the Arab shouted. I knew that voice, and recognized Daron's aquiline nose and his wide grin. "I'm coming down."

We fell into each other's arms. We felt like two brothers united after a long separation, yet it was only four days since we said good-bye at the Khanaqin camp. We went to my room, and traded our stories. His trip from the military camp to Baghdad was certainly more dramatic and adventurous than mine.

"Remember Yitzhak's promise to buy a ticket for me?" Daron began, "Well, after they got me into this fellah outfit and gave me three silver dinars, he introduced me to his friend Gavriel, who was to be my guide. Yitzhak dropped me off at the Khanaquin train station. Gavriel purchased my ticket and joined me in the same car, but he sat apart. He remained silent throughout the journey, just watching me from his seat and occasionally motioning to me with his hand. Soon a conductor began checking the tickets. When he approached me, I was nodding, as if half-asleep. He inspected my ticket and returned it to me.

"Past midnight, they had another inspection, this time checking the passports. I felt a bit groggy so I lay down on the floor beside my seat. When the conductor stepped over me and shook my arm, I pretended I was still asleep. He kept pulling at my arm and speaking in Arabic. I sat up and gave him my ticket. He shook his head and walked away. I saw him speaking to a police officer as he was watching me. I turned my head to check with Gavriel. He raised his hand and rubbed his thumb and forefinger. He was telling me how to handle the problem– with a baksheesh. This is what the silver coins were for.

'The policeman came up to my seat. I understood from his gestures that he wanted to see my papers. He leaned over me, his rifle between his knees. I pulled out one coin and kept it in my open palm, so he could see it. He did and promptly sat next

to me. I saw that he accepted my offer, so I casually dropped it his pocket, but he didn't budge. Obviously, he wanted more money. I took put another coin, and stuck my hand into his pocket, jingling the two coins. The policeman got up, patted my back and walked to the back of the compartment.

"A few hours passed without any problems, but when the sun rose, another inspection began. Gavriel waved his arm, as if tell me to keep moving. As the inspector entered my compartment, I walked over to the next one, keeping my eye on him. I kept moving from one car ahead of him, all the while stumbling over sleeping passengers, tripping over their parcels on the floor. Finally, I reached the first car of the train. I stepped outside, facing the locomotive. I was trapped!

"I climbed on top of the car, then jumped from one car to another until I reached the other end of the train. I climbed down to and went into the last car of the train. I was quite breathless. I sat down and waited. A number of men were kneeling, absorbed in their morning prayers. I knelt down and imitated their movement, mumbling unintelligibly and hitting the floor with my forehead. My charade was successful because after the prayers the worshipers invited me to share their food, but I was too scared they'd find out I was no Muslim so I made some guttural noises and walked to from one car to another till I reached the one with Gavriel. He smiled when he saw me but signaled with his hand that I was to sit apart. As we approached Baghdad, I watched him and followed him off the train. When we were out of the station, he came over to me. He hailed a cab and brought me to this hotel. He took me to his room, where I collapsed from sheer exhaustion.

"I fell into a deep sleep. This morning I woke up in cold sweat. I couldn't remember where I was. It took me a few minutes to put together the events of the last day and night. I was alone in the room. Gavriel left a pita with some olives on the

table. I ate, drank some water and walked over the balcony. Then I saw this strange guy in a white suit, reading a book! Without your moustache you look a bit Asiatic with those high Tartar cheek bones."

"My family came from the Ukraine," I said, "perhaps some of my ancestors mingled with the Khazar tribes that converted to Judaism."

"Khazar shmazar," Daron said, "it doesn't make any difference to the bloody Poles. To them you're a Yid, period. You know, I feel so much better now that we're together again."

"Me too," I said. "Now, let's look for Dr. Rosenfeld. Keep some distance behind me, so we don't attract attention."

"Don't you like my shmattes?"

"They're more comfortable than my tight shoes."

I took Daron to Abu Nuwas Street. We promenaded on one side of the street, then on the other, reading window displays and professional shingles. But none of the signs in English had a Jewish name. We went back to our hotel, stopping on the way in a souk to buy pita, dates, olives and oranges. We ate in my room, and reminisced about our experiences during the past few months.

"Remember when we bought two dozen eggs on the beach at the Pahlevi port?" Daron said. "How we cooked them over an open fire. After getting out of the Soviet Union, it was the greatest omelette I ever had."

"I recall standing on the beach and watching the white caps," I said.

"Soon we 'll walk on the beaches of Tel-Aviv or Haifa," Daron said.

His voice did not sound very optimistic. The precariousness of our situation was dawning on both of us, after the first abortive attempt to locate our would-be savior.

"We'll go the Chief Rabbi first thing tomorrow morning," I said."I know where he lives."

"I hope he understands modern Hebrew," Daron said.

"As a Sephardic rabbi he's bound to. But if there's a problem, I'll speak to him in English."

6

Chief Rabbi Hakham Sasson Khadoorie lived in a white, two-story house, surrounded by a garden. We joined a wizened old man sitting on the porch, groaning in pain, waiting to be admitted. A tall, bearded attendant escorted a pair of roly-poly men out of the house. They were all smiles. The attendant motioned to the old man who followed him. Ten minutes later, the man came out, looking fit and happy.

"This rabbi must be a healer," I said to Daron, as the attendant ushered us into the study of his master. In a stark contrast with the bright exterior of the house, this was a large room, filled with silver artifacts gleaming faintly in the dim light provided by a single curtained window. Proudly displayed on the shelves behind a desk were torah pointers, seder plates, menorahs and an antique silver *tzedakah* box (used for collecting alms). A massive oak table stood in the center of the room, covered with large tomes and neatly stacked manuscripts.

Rabbi Khadoorie was a tall, heavy man. He wore a black satin robe and a black hat. Peering at us from behind his black-rimmed glasses, his eyes had a severe expression.

"Come on, in," the rabbi said in English. We approached, but he did not invite us to sit down, so we stood before him, leaning on the chairs in front of the desk, like two pupils summoned to a principal's office for some offense. The rabbi stared at us coldly and said something in Arabic that sounded like a rebuke.

"We are refugees from Poland," Daron said in Hebrew.

The rabbi fixed us with his penetrating , severe eyes. He remained silent, stroking his long, grey beard.

"We need your help," I said, "we want to go to Palestine."

Rabbi Khadoorie's eyes smouldered with indignation.

"I am no Zionist," he hissed. "You fools– how dare you come here? How dare you endanger my people? Don't you know what's going on in Baghdad? "

"Could you put us in touch with a Zionist leader?" I blurted out. The rabbi stood up and walked up to us. I could feel his hot breath was upon my face. He practically pushed us towards the door with his massive body.

"*Kol Yisrael arevim ze baze,*" Daron said in Hebrew. "Aren't all Jews responsible for one another?"

"Go back where you came from!" the rabbi cried, "My people were killed last year, our women were raped, our houses plundered. I am the President of the Jewish Community. I must cooperate with the authorities. My allegiance is to God and to my congregation in Baghdad. I am not responsible for young crazies like you! May God have mercy on you. May He help you. I can do nothing for you. Begone! Begone!" He slammed the door in our faces.

We lingered on the porch irresolutely, devastated by this vehement rejection.

"Some healer!" Daron muttered.

"You win some, you lose some," I said, hitting the gate of rabbi Khadoorie's fence with my cane. "We lost one battle but the war is not over. Next target: Dr. Rosenfeld."

"Let's find him," Daron said.

We headed for the business section of the city, and covered street after street, without finding our doctor. Whenever I glanced back at Daron, trudging behind me in his sandals, worn-out pants and shabby shirt, I had a vision of Don Quixote and Sancho Pancha, riding together in their quest for adventure. To a stranger we did look like an English master and his lowly Arab servant. Was I thinking of this famous pair

because, subconsciously, I felt that Daron and I were engaged in a hopeless quixotic venture?

Late afternoon, after walking for many hours, we returned to our hotel. Something had to be done before we ran out of our meager funds; before we aroused suspicion and got caught, but we were too downcast to think of any action. I found some relief in our present situation when I was able to kick off my shoes and rest my aching feet.

7

We decided to look for synagogues in the Jewish Quarter before resuming our search for Dr. Rosenfeld. We wound our way through the narrow alleys without finding a house of worship. What we found was trouble. An Arab policeman suddenly appeared at the intersection of two streets. He spoke sharply.

"What do you want?" I asked.

'No English," the policeman said, reaching for his revolver.

I raised my cane and struck him across the neck. He doubled up, dropping his hand gun. I kicked him in the face as he was falling. He collapsed on the pavement. I picked up the revolver and put it in my pocket. I looked around. There was no person in sight.

"Let's beat it," I said.. We ran for a few blocks and then walked to the business district.

"Why did you hit him?" Daron asked.

"We couldn't risk going to the police station at gun point. It would have been the end."

"Well," Daron said, "now we have an offering for the local Haganah underground: one revolver."

We proceeded along the town center, reaching the posh Khalid Ibn Al-Walid Street. We stopped and examined every building.

"Do you read what I read?" I said when I saw the inscription on the window of a ground-floor office.

"Dr. I. Rosenfeld, Optometry," Daron recited excitedly, "Eureka!"

"Wait for me here, " I said.

I opened the front door and entered a small foyer. A young woman in a white smock emerged from an adjoining room.

"I'd like to speak with Dr. Rosenfeld," I said.

"You want appointment?"

"No. It's a private matter."

She eyed me suspiciously.

"I tell him. He busy now. Please sit down."

She disappeared behind a curtain that led to Dr. Rosenfeld's examination office. In a few minutes, a tall man in his forties came out. Clean-shaven, with a light complexion, he looked more like a European movie star than a medical practitioner of Baghdad.

"What can I do for you?" Dr. Rosenfeld asked politely.

"Your name was given to me by Yitzhak Gaon of Khanaqin. I and my friend want to go to Palestine."

Dr. Rosenfeld put his forefinger on his lips.

"Shhh...." he whispered, "we cannot speak now. My assistant is an Arab. Come at six o'clock, after the office closes."

"Hooray!" Daron cried when I related to him my brief conversation with Dr. Rosenfeld.

We walked all the way to Huriya Square, down to the Tigris River, then retraced our steps to Dr. Rosenfeld's office. It was ten past six when he admitted us to his office. I told him our story.

"Where are you staying?" he asked.

"At the Hotel Salim Rashid Ali. We can pay for only one more night."

"Go back to your hotel," Dr. Rosenfeld said, "Shlomo, our Haganah, man will

find a hiding place for you. The streets are not safe and neither is your hotel."

Later that night we were visited by a lank youth with dark eyes, curly black hair and a slightly cleft chin. He was accompanied by a girl whose pretty face was framed by a mass of wavy black hair.

"I am Shlomo," he said, "and this is my sister Shulamith."

At first they asked questions in a standoffish manner; they wanted to make sure we were who we said we were. Both spoke good English. As I was translating their queries into Polish, Daron answered one of them in Hebrew. The reserve of our interrogators melted at once. They began to show off their own command of the language, and now it was Daron who translated from Hebrew into Polish for my benefit.

"We belong to an underground Khalutz cell;" Shlomo confided in us; "we are expecting a shipment of arms from the Haganah in Palestine very soon. If the Arabs attempt another pogrom, we'll be ready for them–not like last year when they went on a rampage and killed us like we were sheep. We'll try to smuggle you out of Baghdad in the British convoy of buses driven by Jews from Palestine."

" Meanwhile," Shulamith said, " we've arranged a safe place for you."

"I have a modest contribution for your defense," I said, as I handed the policeman's revolver to Shlomo. He took it with a broad smile, but his mien changed when I told him how I got the gun. "The police will be looking for you now." he said with a worried expression on his face, "I hope the bastards will not use this as a pretext for action against the Jewish Quarter. You must lie low." He gave the gun to his sister who put it in her purse. They brought us to a small synagogue and led us to our hiding place: a small, stuffy attic on the roof. Shulamith went out to get some food. After they left us, we ate then stripped to our under shorts and lay down on the

two straw mattresses that had been prepared for us. The Englishman's briefcase with the Conrad book and my little dictionary was on the floor, under my white suit. I could not read because there was no light in the attic or on the roof. It was a clear night and I could see the Big Dipper through the open door.

Although we achieved our first objective in establishing contact with the Baghdad Haganah underground, we were not in the mood for celebrating. We remained silent, pensive, each brooding upon our still precarious situation. Sleep enshrouded us like a benediction from the starry sky.

In the morning there was a lot of commotion in the synagogue. Before we had a chance to investigate, Shulamith breezed in, a festive white shawl draped about her shoulders, a radiant smile on her face She was carrying a basket of food.

"Today is *Erev Yom Kippur*," she said, "this is your last meal on the eve of the Day of Atonement. Tomorrow we all fast. In the evening Shlomo will fetch you and bring you to our home for supper. Meanwhile, I'll lock the door to the staircase. We don't want anyone to know you're hiding here. Only the rabbi and the caretaker know. But you can hear some of the service from the roof."

We listened to the voices of the congregation and their *khazan*, intoning the prayers. Although we understood why we were barred from joining the worshipers, we couldn't help feeling left out, isolated."

"I'm sorry I cannot pray with them, " Daron said. "I grew up in an observant home. Never missed the High Holy Days' services before the war."

"My grandparents were orthodox, but I drifted away from religious practice since the age of thirteen, though I still remember the Hebrew words of the *Kol Nidrei* prayer: *Kol Nidrei, V'eesarei, V'ekharamei, V'ekomanei, V'eckinuyei*. Also Yascha Heifetz's rendition of the haunting melody. I understand the first two words, 'all vows,' but not the rest of it."

"The words mean: vows, oaths and pledges. The Sephardic Jews do not sing this prayer, they just recite it. After asking for pardon, the reader says: *Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam, shehekyanu v'ekimanu v'ehigiyanu lazman haze.* Blessed art thou, Lord our God, who has granted us life and sustenance and permitted us to reach this season."

"Yes, rabbi."

We settled down on the roof and opened the basket. It contained fried chicken, *hummos*, cucumbers, tomatoes, pitas, oranges, grapes and a carafe of red wine with two glasses.

"Isn't this wonderful!" Daron said.

I filled the glasses.

"A toast to Shulamith and Shlomo, " I said.

We clinked our glasses and drank the wine. We dipped slicess of pita into the *hummos*. We left the chicken for the evening. Daron retired to the storage room. I lay on roof, and opened my Conrad book. I began reading the third story in the volume, "The End of the Tether," but stopped after two chapters. I was not in the mood for the problems of old Captain Whalley and his daughter. I turned some pages. A passage caught my attention: "In the steadily darkening universe a sinister clearness fell upon his ideas. In the illuminating moments of suffering he saw life, men, all things, the whole earth with all her burden of created nature, as he had never seen before." I understood that at some point in the story Whalley loses his sight. Now that he cannot see, he begins to see clearly.

I closed the book and listened to the sounds of the afternoon prayers in the synagogue below. The women's sobbing ululation, the *khazan*'s high-pitched, ardent supplication to the Almighty, those voices made me think of the German soldier at the Stalingrad front, who screamed in pain before I killed him.

It happened a few months ago when I was enrolled at the Tashkent University. One day I and a bunch of other students , more than a hundred, were selected by a recruiting officer. We were loaded onto trucks and driven to the Central Command of the Red Army. We received army uniforms and heavy woolen coats. They

brought us to the Lenin Square, where a be-medaled middle-aged captain addressed the group from a podium flanked by two huge red flags.

"The Germans are advancing on Kharkov and Voroshilovgrad," the captain thundered, raising his arm, "Comrade Stalin declared that Stalingrad must never fall to the fascist enemy. You students will now join the heroic Red Army defenders. You will receive your weapons at the railway depot. You will proceed to the Training Base. Ride to victory, young lions! For Stalin and the Fatherland!"

We trained in Tashkent for a week. It was a superficial, accelerated course to familiarize the recruits with rifles and grenades. There was a lot of stupid marching in the streets, singing *Vykhodila na beryeg Katyusha*. The drill sergeant was a dimwit who apparently did not know any other songs, or maybe he was fond of some Katyusha, so we sang of the blasted little Kate who went to the shore, inviting curious glances from dark-skinned Uzbeks. We were then shipped to the Stalingrad area, where we learned fast how to survive the incessant shelling of the city and its industrial complex: the huge oil refinery and the chemical factories.

The flames of the fires all around us did not, however, cool the ideological zeal of the *politruk*, the political officer who was sleuthing for would-be-traitors and spies. I had just returned from a nasty patrol in the fields outside the city, where thousands of soldiers were digging trenches and placing anti-tank installations. I was cold, tired and hungry. I chewed on the dry salami stick, a kind of a jerky that along with a container of vodka was standard issue. The *politruk* Ivan Kutchev interrogated me in his headquarters, a bombed-out shelter, illumined only by a faint light of an oil lamp hanging over a table littered with his files.

I do not know how or why I had aroused his suspicions and earned his hostility. Perhaps it was my Russian accent, which I acquired in childhood from my educated

mother, uncles and aunts, who had fled from Revolutionary Russia to Poland in 1921. Or it could have been anti-Semitism pure and simple. Probably both. Strangely enough, none of my fellow Russian soldiers exhibited any prejudice towards me.

"Well, Andrei," Kutchev began "or should I call you *Abrashka*, little Abraham–no? "

"My name is Andrew, Andrei in Russian."

"Well now, Andrei, tell me about your father and mother. Where are they?"

"My father and mother divorced when I was two years old. My father emigrated to Argentina. I have not seen him since, and I don't know where he lives. My mother is in Luts'k, in Western Ukraine, where I grew up."

"Aha!" the *politruk* hissed triumphantly, "She is with Gitler!"

"What do you mean, she is with Hitler, you son-of-a-bitch?" I cried indignantly. "She is under Nazi occupation. My whole family is there, and I don't know whether any of them are still alive."

"Don't get your monkey up, *Abrashka*, you know very well what I mean. How come you're not with them? How did you get to Tashkent? Who sent you there, hah?"

"I was studying at the Lvov University when the Germans attacked the Soviet Union. I escaped with the Red Army."

"I'll be frank with you, my dear Andrei," Kutchev, suddenly assuming an air of cordiality, "I don't feel you belong in this regiment. I will recommend that you be sent back to the University of Tashkent's Special Units Department. They will train you as a parachutist for assignments behind the German lines. This will save us a great deal of trouble. If the Germans don't kill you, the Ukrainians or the Poles will. Either way, we'll be rid of you."

This interrogation occurred several days before we counterattacked General von Paulus's Sixth Army. Wave after wave of our troops advanced beyond our trenches, only to be mowed down by machine guns. It was late afternoon when the commander of our platoon, Lieutenant Rostov, decided to stop the suicidal rush. We crouched behind a rocky hill that offered protection against the withering enemy fire. He asked for volunteers to go behind the enemy line and silence one machine gun which was particularly deadly. Three students from the Tashkent University responded: Igor, a tall taciturn fellow with melancholy eyes; Boris, a heavily set fellow, and I.

We crawled towards our target, stopping a few yards behind it. Igor rose to toss a grenade but had been spotted before he threw it by one of two men who were manning the machine gun. The German fired his Luger. Igor was hit in his chest and fell. Boris and I leaped upon the two soldiers in the pit. My left arm struck the muzzle of the machine gun, and as I tangled with my German, as if we were in a wrestling match, I dropped my rifle. The German soldier was wielding a big hunting knife. He stabbed me in my left shoulder and then cut into my left leg, above my ankle. I picked up my rifle, swung it, smashing his face with the butt.

"*Meine Augen! Meine Augen!*" he shrieked, letting go of his knife and covering his eyes with his hands. "*Ich bin blind!*" he moaned. I fired my rifle, practically blowing off his head. His face was an ugly, bloody mask.

Boris pulled the trigger of his rifle before he landed on top of his German, killing him instantly. Though I was bleeding from my two wounds I managed to crawl back to our lines with Boris's help. Our medic patched me up. On the following morning I was sent to the hospital in Tashkent, the same where I had worked in the kitchen as a stoker, and in the ward as a nurse.

I had not realized at the time that my left arm was broken at the elbow. Neither did the surgeon who treated me. The bones fell into place during the next couple of weeks when my leg and shoulder were healing. The surgeon who stitched me up wanted to break the arm again and reset it correctly. I refused. I didn't mind having one crooked arm that appeared shorter than my other one. What I did mind was the infection in the long cut above my ankle, which delayed my discharge from the hospital.

Luckily for me, Sonya, the cook, found me. Like a true angel of mercy, she visited me every day, supplementing my diet of thin soup with tasty and nourishing tidbits. This time my Sonichka did not demand any amorous services from me. She was a perceptive woman and a real friend. I doubt that I would have walked out of the hospital alive without her help.

When I did walk out and returned to the University, I discovered that the Special Units Department was not in operation. It seemed that I fallen through th;e cracks of the Red Army's unwieldy machine. I received no summons to return to my unit at the Stalingrad front. Nor did I hear from Kutchev, whose benevolent design for my demise behind the German lines failed to materialize. A couple of weeks after leaving the hospital bed I went to Yang Youl and enlisted in General Anders's Polish Army.

Thus was I denied the honor of dying for Stalin and the Glorious Communist Fatherland in what would become the largest single battle of World War Two, if not the greatest battle in world history. In February of 1943, General von Paulus surrendered to the Red Army. The casualties exceeded one million soldiers. I guess I bore a charmed life.

While I rejoiced in my survival, the recollection of my stint in the Red Army

in Stalingrad and the German's battered face brought no joy to me on that Holy Day. I saw in it another cloud of *my* "steadily darkening universe." "The sinister clearness" that fell upon Conrad's blind captain eluded me, perhaps because it spelled desperation, and I refused to give up hope. Daron and I were not at the end of our tether, though we were temporarily stuck in a Baghdad synagogue.

9

"Praising what is lost makes the remembrance dear," the King observes in Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well*. We fasted on that *Yom Kippur* without atoning for our sins. Rather, we entertained each other with stories of our childhood and adolescent experiences, waxing rhapsodic about our native towns, Daron's Makov and my Luts'k. From the perspective of a roof and an attic in a Baghdad house of worship these Polish towns loomed from the past like some familiar legends. But we also dwelt on the darker sides of life in Poland: the ubiquitous anti-Semitism manifesting itself in discrimination, verbal insults and physical attacks.

A basic difference in our attitudes emerged from our conversation. I did not share Daron's unequivocal position: he hated all things Polish, including the Polish language in which he conveyed these sentiments, and which he spoke with a pronounced Yiddish accent. *My* feelings toward the country of my birth were fraught with ambivalence. I abhorred the Poles' bigotry, and I knew that as a Jew with a slightly swarthy complexion I would always be an alien in the midst of the Polish nation. But I couldn't help regarding myself as a Pole.

I was a Pole because, as the poet Julian Tuwim put it, the birch and the willow were closer to me than the palm and the citrus, which still belonged in the realm of fantasy. Because Mickiewicz and Chopin were dearer to me at the time than Byron or Beethoven. Because the Polish landscape, for reasons which are not rational, was infinitely dearer to me than the English moors and meadows. Because it was in Warsaw, at the Saski Garden production of *Hamlet*, that I had my first encounter with the Melancholy Prince of Denmark–and he spoke to me in Polish, as did the immortal

hidalgo of La Mancha. Tuwim, who lived in exile during World War II, wrote in *The Polish Flowers* that for him Poland was home, and all the other countries merely hotels. Poetic creation was inconceivable for him in any other language, no matter how well he could master it. I lacked that passionate conviction in 1942, not having written anything of import in Polish, and only beginning my love affair with the English language. My future wanderings showed that I could live and be creative in countries other than Poland; and, moreover, that I could think and write in English. But I did not know that in Baghdad, so I clung to my affection for Polish language and literatwure.

Unlike Daron, I was not steeped in the Jewish tradition. Though my grandparents were observant Jews, the rest of the family was not. Mother, uncles and aunt, with whom I lived in my childhood, were all secular, emancipated Jews, with whom I spoke Polish only, while communicating with my grandparents in Russian. Daron could read the Bible in the original. He could read the modern Hebrew poets like Bialik, who was accessible to me only in Polish translation. I could recite reams of Polish and Russian poetry, but except for a few Yiddish songs I heard from my mother and grandmother, I had no knowledge of Yiddish or Hebrew literature.

Thus, Polish literature was an integral part of my intellectual and spiritual self. Daron did not care if he never heard a word of Polish or saw a Polish book. I did, which is why my desertion from the Polish army of General Anders vexed me with pangs of conscience . Both Daron and I were determined to reach *Eretz Yisrael*, but I would enter the Holy Land with a sizeable Polish baggage, while he would fit in instantly. Our discussions on that day foreshadowed my future struggle to determine my cultural identity by the choice of a language in which to express myself.

Shlomo arrived after sundown and took us to his home, a spacious two-story house, surrounded by a yard with fruit trees, vines and large clusters of grapes that hung at the entrance. The Sehayiks (for that was the family name of Shlomo and Shulamith) turned their residence into an important center for the clandestine activities of the *Khalutz* Movement, which was set up in 1942 with the help of emissaries of the *Haganah* in Palestine. The basement of the house served as the place where the Swearing-In Ceremony was held for new members. In the center stood a table covered with the Jewish national flag, with a Bible on one side and a gun on the other. The new recruits would swear on their honor and everything they held sacred to obey orders of the Movement's leaders and guard its secrets. In the yard beneath the inactive *tabun*, an oven for making bread, there was a secret cache of weapons and ammunition.

The supper was served at a low table. We sat on cushions or little stools. Shlomo had brought a *zboon* for Daron, a long straight white gown-- I suppose to erase the disparity between my sartorial splendor and his peasant rags. This gesture was one of the many kindnesses bestowed upon us by this family and their readiness to assist us despite the risk of imprisonment or worse. It was remarkable, I thought, as I looked at the friendly faces around the table, how these descendants of the Babylonian Jews, exiled some 2500 years ago, could bond with two young Jews from Catholic Poland.

After the supper Shlomo walked us to the synagogue. We sat on the roof with the basket filled with oranges, grapes and a bottle of water, which was given to us by Shulamith. We didn't talk much that night. We were quite overwhelmed by the hospitality of the Sehayiks, but it made us sad, for both of us thought of our own families, wondering whether they were still alive.

10

The following morning, my tenth day in Baghdad, Shlomo came up, with a troubled look on his face.

"Bad news," he said, "the police are looking for you guys, checking one synagogue after another. They just inspected one of the largest, the Mesouda Shemtob. You must stay out of the Jewish Quarter during the day. Walk around the city. Wait for me in the courtyard of the hotel, in front of the Town Clock Tower. I'll try to get there at seven."

"Here's your *zboon*, Shlomo," Daron said, "I think I'll attract more attention wearing it than in my ragged outfit." Shlomo put the garment under his arm. "Do you have any money?" he asked.

I checked my pocket and took out the three coins I still had."

"Three dinars," I said.

"You should have a bit more," Shlomo said, "here's another five."

"Thanks so much," I said, pocketing the coins.

Shlomo waved at us as we headed for the center of the city. He walked in the opposite direction. So, once again we trudged along the streets of Baghdad, my toes smarting in my tight shoes. Many years later, when I read *Chinese Footbinding: A History of a Curious Erotic Custom* by Howard S. Levy, I knew the pain suffered by the girls and women subjected to this strange mutilation, as I recalled our walking days in Baghdad.

After a few hours of strolling in the business section of the city we descended to the west bank of the Tigris in southern Baghdad, lined with bungalows, booths constructed of planks and palm fronds, which provided shelter for swimmers. There

were also eateries and cafés. We selected the El-Beidha Casino, a coffee house off Abu Nuwas Street, with a terrace overlooking the river. We sat in the corner. I kicked off my shoes and massaged my sore toes. I ordered the specialty of the house, *samak masguf*, recalling Captain Patterson's recommendation of grilled fish, and a carafe of cheap local white wine. We ate, watching an old fisherman on a small island in the middle of the river. A couple came up in a rowing boat. The fisherman grilled his catch over an open fire, and served the fish to them, wrapped in grape leaves.

This peaceful, idyllic scene reminded me of the countryside south east of Warsaw, as I was marching out of the burning city in September of 1939, crossing picturesque brooks, passing quiet farms, green fields and grazing cows – serene pastoral vistas, until scorched by screaming Nazi Stukas, diving from the skies. The tranquility of that afternoon struck me as quite incongruous: we behaved like tourists, out to savor the pleasures of Baghdad, not like two desperate young men questing for a homeland, uncertain of what the next day would bring them.

We stayed in the coffee house for a couple of hours. The tab came to 450 fils with the tip. At this rate, I calculated, our eight dinars should last you for another week, if we had only one meal a day.

"Let's go down to the water," I suggested.

"Great idea," Daron said.

I took off my socks, put them into my shoes which I placed inside the attaché case. I sat on it, to protect my precious white suit. Daron had no such problems. I rolled up my pants, washed my socks and waded into the cool water.

We arrived at the Hotel Salim Rashid Ali at dusk, and waited on a bench in the courtyard, next to a braying donkey, watching the Town Clock Tower. Shlomo, ever the efficient underground operative, pulled up in front of the hotel in a battered white

van a few minutes after seven o'clock. He drove us to El-Adhamiya, a township north of Baghdad and east of the Tigris. Some years ago, Shlomo told us, a group of thirteen affluent Jews from the Jewish district of Taht-El-Takia bought a parcel of land in what was a predominantly Muslim El-Nassa neighborhood. They built spacious houses, with courtyards and swimming pools. In one of them, owned by Shimshon Kazzaz, whose name means "silk dealer," they erected a small synagogue, a one-story building with a Star of David on its pediment. The synagogue was not being used at this time, for the residents preferred to attend the High Holiday services at the Mesuda Shemtob house of worship..

"Mr. Kazzaz and his entire family went to a wedding in Beirut," Shlomo said, "they'll be away for another three days. Daniel, the old *shamash*, the keeper of the synagogue, has agreed to hide you. I don't think the police will be looking for you in this area. It faces the Shiite holy city of El-Kathemia, on the other side of the river I'll come for you on the third day."

"What happens then?" I asked.

"We'll try a synagogue that has already been checked by the police."

We spent the two days in a stuffy, windowless storage room, emerging only at night for a few minutes. We had to keep low so that the neighbors would not see or hear us. Daniel brought us food and water, but we could not communicate with him, for he spoke only Arabic. On the second night we took a chance and went skinny dipping in the pool. It was close to midnight, we figured, and there were no lights on the street. We were lucky that Daniel chose not to lock us in. When Shlomo came to pick us up on the third day, we were greatly relieved. He had managed to secure another hiding place for us, at the Meir Tweig synagogue, and would take us there in the evening. We were to meet at the Town Tower Clock again. Meanwhile, it was

back to the streets of Baghdad.

"When all this is over," I said, "each of us will qualify as a tourist guide in the city of Baghdad."

"Yeah, we'll start a travel office. Put our names together: DAR-AND TRAVEL. In Tel-Aviv."

"You are a born businessman."

"True. At one time in Russia I figured out how to buy and sell butter. It kept me going for a while."

"Are you planning to go into some business when we get to Palestine?"

"Not before I get some education."

"I'd like to move into a library. So much time has been wasted. There are so many things I want to learn."

"I want to study architecture. I am going to be a builder."

"You're more practical than I," I said. "When I was a kid I dreamed of traveling all over the world. Now all I wish for is to find my family, to get them out of Luts'k. Then to be close to a good library."

We turned a corner. I looked up. The sign read: Khalid Ibn Al-Walid. It was the street where Dr. Rosenfeld had his office. I decided to see him. Daron waited outside. Dr. Rosenfeld was very pleased to see me.

"I've been trying to reach Shlomo," he said. "I have great news. Moshe Dayan is expected to arrive here any day. He will help you get out of Baghdad."

"Who is Moshe Dayan?" I asked.

"He's an important *Haganah* man. But you must be cleared by Enzo Sereni, who is an emissary from Palestine. He's at the Umayyan Hotel."

"That's where I stayed when I arrived in Baghdad."

I wasn't exactly thrilled to go back to the lion's den. The last thing I needed was to run into Captain Matuszewski or Captain Patterson. But I had to take that chance. We went to Hotel Umayyan. I called Sereni's room from the lobby. He asked me to wait for him outside. A few minutes later, a short, slender man in a grey suit approached us.

"Follow me," he said in English, and led us to a little garden in the back of the hotel. We found a secluded bench, and sat down. He lapsed into Yiddish, which he spoke with a funny Italian inflection, asking question after question. He wanted to make sure we were genuine refugees. At one point he demanded to know the names of Zionist leaders in my town of Luts'k. Since my involvement with Zionism was rather marginal, all I could remember was a summer camp in a forest, organized by *Hashomer Hatzair*, a leftist Zionist organization. My cousin from the neighboring town of Dubno took us to that camp. His name was Zyoma Meizler. It drew a blank. Sereni never heard of him. Suddenly I remembered another name, Yunitchman, whom I have never met, but knew him to be a leader of the right-wing *Betar* Movement.

"I know that sonofabitch," Sereni said, smiling. He knew now that I was legitimate, for how would a spy know the name of a local political figure in a provincial Polish town? And when Daron addressed him in Hebrew, he was positively beaming. After I recapitulated the story of our decision to abandon Anders's Army and our present situation, Sereni shook his head gravely.

"*Zwei meshugener*!" he snapped at us, "Two crazies. Who do you think you are? You're not only risking your lives– you're endangering our entire operation. We are organizing a Jewish defense force through our *Khalutz* Movement." But the tenor of his voice indicated that he was impressed rather than angry. After all, he too was

engaged in a highly perilous enterprise. And the emigration of Iraqui Jews to Palestine was one of his principal objectives.

Years later I learned a great deal more about that Enzo Sereni. He came from a distinguished Italian-Jewish family, and was one of the founders of *Kibbutz* Givat Brenner, south of Tel-Aviv. He volunteered for a heroic mission after his stint in Baghdad; he parachuted behind enemy lines, and was captured by the Nazis. He was sent from one camp to another, and was finally shot in Dachau in 1944. A decade later, several parachutists who had survived the war were killed when they attended a memorial ceremony at *Kibbutz Ma'agan* on the eastern shore of Galilee. A light plane, which was supposed to drop a parachute bearing a scroll with a message from the President of the State of Israel, circled above, and suddenly stalled, crashing into the crowd below. One of Enzo Sereni's children was among the dead.

Moshe Dayan became a famous general of the Israel Defense Army, and an illustrious political leader.

Our meeting with Sereni ended on an up-beat note. He told us that Dayan was on his way to Baghdad, in a convoy of buses owned by the Egged company of Palestine, a cooperative of Jewish drivers. The buses were hired by the British Army, to transport troops from Palestine to Iraq.

"We have a problem;" Sereni said, "the British fear that if the Arabs in Baghdad learn of the presence of Jews from Palestine, there would be disturbances. They will not allow the drivers to leave the camp, which is located some 20 miles west of Baghdad. But I know Moshe Dayan. He will find a way to get here. And, I am sure, he will figure out how to get you into that convoy on its return trip."

11

The two days we waited for Dayan's arrival seemed interminably long, but we bore the tedium of our daytime walking routine with something akin to elation. Finally, there was light at the end of the tunnel. Dayan's name spelled hope. In my mind he assumed a mythical stature. I endured the discomfort caused by my undersize shoes almost cheerfully, in the knowledge that it would end shortly, limping and shuffling my feet like an old man, while Daron strode behind me jauntily.

The encounter with Dayan in Sereni's hotel room was anti-climatic. I imagined Dayan as a powerful, heroic figure. We waited for his arrival for a couple of hours. When Sereni opened the door for him, we saw a barefoot , lean, wiry man in a dirty undershirt and shorts, carrying a bundle under his arm. He waved his hand at Sereni, and headed for the bathroom.

When he emerged, after washing up and putting on a clean shirt and a suit, he looked quite different. I noticed the empty socket of his left eye. He had removed his eye patch so as not to draw attention to himself (He had lost the eye in a military action in Syria, leading a British commando unit against the Vichy forces). The remaining eye glittered in his tanned face with a strange intensity.

Enzo Sereni was right about Dayan's resourcefulness. Unable to obtain transportation to Baghdad, he stripped to his under shorts, wrapped his suit, shoes and socks into a bundle, slipped out of the encampment where the bus convoy was parked, and set out for Baghdad on foot. When he came to the bridge over the Tigris River, he joined a shepherd driving his sheep to the market, prodding an animal with a stick he picked up on the highway. Dayan had walked twenty miles that day. The concierge of the Hotel Umayyan refused entry to this beggarly man with muddy

feet. Dayan did what Sereni had done earlier to admit Daron to his room: he gave the man a *baksheesh* of 500 fils.

Sereni ordered sandwiches and drinks from room service and introduced us. When Dayan had eaten and relaxed on the sofa, he wanted to hear our story. I spoke to him in English, Daron in Hebrew. He must have liked our tale for, unlike Sereni, he didn't think our escapade was an act of madness. Dayan was a laconic man.

'*Tov*," he said, smiling. "Good. I see that these fellows like to play ducks and drakes with their lives. I have played this game myself. Tell you what we do. Pick me up in front of Dr. Rosenfeld's house tomorrow evening, at nine. And, Enzo, do me as favor, dress these two daredevils in British Army uniforms. We need a car. I've brought two loads of weapons for the Movement."

"It's all arranged," Sereni said.

Shlomo brought us to Dr. Rosenfeld's house at six o'clock. He gave us two sets of khaki uniforms and a pair of sandals for me. After going to such trouble to get rid of my army uniform, I had to put it on again. Except that this one had no strap with "Poland" on it. We changed in the bathroom, where I left my white suit, my tormenting shoes and the attaché case with the Conrad book. I kept the little red dictionary in my pocket. I still have it – more than half a century later.

As we waited in the living room for the hour of departure, I could not resist the temptation to examine Dr. Rosenfeld's book shelves. I picked out Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* in English. I had read it in Polish years ago, but could not resist the temptation to re-read the pages describing Edmond Dantes' escape from the dungeon. I sat in an easy chair, totally immersed in that fictional adventure, oblivious to my own impending escape from Baghdad. Daron roused me from my absorption.

"Hey, Andy! Dayan is waiting outside. C'mon, let's go!"

I gave Dr. Rosenfeld a bear hug.

"Thanks for everything," I said. "I'll have to come back to finish this book."

"I'm sure you'll find it in Jerusalem," he replied, "or maybe I shall bring it to you one day.

"Next year in Jerusalem!" Daron cried.

"God willing," Dr. Rosenfeld said, embracing him.

Shlomo and Dayan were waiting in the car in front of the house. We got in, and drove to the Jumhuriya Bridge. Shlomo had secured an appropriate pass for the vehicle, so we had no problem crossing the bridge. He drove out of the city and when he reached a large military camp for the Indian Army, Dayan instructed him to park outside the fence surrounding the base. Shlomo gave him a flashlight and a wire cutter.

"Wait for us here," Dayan said.

We followed Dayan, as he found the right spot for entry. He cut an opening in the barbed wire. We crawled in and crossed a small stream that ran parallel to the highway. We skirted some barracks and found ourselves in a round parking lot. Dayan examined the licenses of the seven Egged buses standing in a row. He selected the third one, and tapped the window with his flashlight. A man emerged from the bus.

"Eli?" Dayan whispered.

"*Ken*" the man said. "Yes. I'm ready."

"Two boys are with me. After we deliver the stuff, they'll come bak. They're refugees from Poland. Take them in your bus."

"But how am I going to hide them from the British? "

"You'll figure it out, Eli. We have no time. I'll be back the day after tomorrow."

Eli, the bus driver, opened the luggage compartment and pulled out two large valises. Dayan asked me and Daron to carry them, as he guided us back to the highway and Shlomo's car. The valises, containing a couple of Sten guns, revolvers, grenades and ammunition, were very heavy. When we came to the stream Daron and I had to carry one valise at a time. We got across without making our load wet. We loaded the valises into the trunk.

"Go back to Eli's bus," Dayan said, handing the flashlight to me. "Good luck!"

"God bless you," Daron said, as he shook Shlomo's hand.

"Give our love to Shulamith, "I said, "and my deepest thanks for all you have done for us."

The car drove back to Baghdad. We found our way back to the parking lot with the buses. The lights in Eli's bus were on. There was another man with him inside. We entered the bus.

"This is Uri," Eli said, "the leader of the convoy."

Uri glared at us.

"Eli tells me you want to travel with us. I cannot allow it. Dayan did not consult me. If the British discover you, our entire underground operation will be jeopardized. I'll go to jail and lose my job. All of us may go to jail. Who's going to support my wife and two small children? This is war time. The British have arrested hundreds of Jews who help illegal immigrants."

"I can mingle with the British," I said, "I can speak English.

"No, no, no! I want you to get out–now, before the British officer comes in the

morning. You two are not my responsibility. Let Moshe Dayan arrange the trip for you. You've got to leave now."

Daron attempted to remonstrate with Uri in Hebrew, to no avail. The convoy leader's face was flushed with anger, and he gesticulated wildly. Eli tried to mollify him, taking his arm, but Uri pushed him away.

"This is how the Palestinian Jews help Jewish refugees?" I asked bitterly.

"If you don't leave imediately," Uri hissed, "I will call the Ghurka guards. They shoot first and ask questions later. Get out!"

He stalked out of the bus in fury.

Daron and I looked at each other, downcast, devastated by this unexpected rejection. Dayan had failed us.

"I'm sorry," Eli said, "but Uri Weissman is the man in charge. I cannot overrule him.

"Well, my friend," I said to Daron,"back to the drawing board."

"I told you I wanted to be an architect," Daron said with a lame effort to sound cheerful.

We left the bus and began the long trek to Baghdad.

"Every cloud has a silver lining," I said.

"Meaning what?" Daron asked.

"Well, I don't have to walk in my tight shoes any more."

"And I don't have to walk behind a man in a white suit any more," Daron countered.

When the Jumhuriya Bridge loomed in the distance, we pulled a Dayan: we took off our military jackets and made a bundle of them; we waited till we saw a bunch of peasants taking their cows to the city, and we followed them closely. The

sun began to rise as we crossed the bridge and headed for Dr. Rosenfeld's office at Khalid Ibn Al-Walid Street.

"The sun also rises," I said.

"I don't get it," Daron said.

"Well, it's a title of a novel by Ernest Hemingway, an American writer, taken from the Bible. A passage from Ecclesiastes, something about one generation passing and another generation coming, but the earth abiding forever... the sun also rising and the sun going down... the rivers running into the sea, yet the sea is not full."

"It's a damn shame; to have come so close to our goal and yet so far from it right now."

"The sun has risen. It will rise again for us, Daron."

"I hope you are right."

Dr. Rosenfeld was shocked to see us. He went into action at once, calling Enzo Sereni. Luckily for us, Dayan was still in his room. He was livid with indignation when he heard what happened to us. He promised try again this evening. He managed to get Shlomo. So we made a second attempt, repeating the journey of last night. We arrived at the parking lot with the convoy of buses. We boarded Eli's bus, and Dayan began to argue with him, trying to persuade him to take us with him. To his chagrin Uri Weissman had seen the the flickering light of Dayan's flashlight, and he stormed into our bus.

"Not again!" he cried, "you can't do this to me."

"Calm down," Dayan said softly, "calm down, Uri."

"I told them to leave, and I'm telling them again!" Uri shouted.

"You can call your Ghurka guards," I said. "This is the end of the line."

"There's no way we'll go back," Daron argued in Hebrew.

"Eli," Dayan said, " you are the son of Avraham Shapiro, a *Shomer*, one of the original Watchmen of the early pioneer days who fought the Arab marauding bands and protected isolated Jewish farms of new immigrants, some of them illegal. Surely you will not defile this noble fighting tradition and turn over these two brave young Polish Jews to the Arabs or to the British. I managed to travel with you without being detected by the British. The one who speaks English will replace me. The other one can pose as a mechanic. You'll keep him under the hood or under the bus, so he will not be seen."

"All right," Eli said. "Listen, Uri. I'll take full responsibility. In any case, the British soldiers who are coming back with us will fill only five buses. So my bus will be one of the two empty ones."

"All right," Uri Weissman relented, "if they get caught, I know nothing about it. You'll take the blame."

"That's what I just said," Eli protested. "Relax. Everything will work out."

Dayan had redeemed himself. He was not as laconic as he appeared in the Sereni's hotel room. He bid us good bye with a twinkle in his one eye.

"See you in *Eretz Yisrael*," he said,"I will call *Kibbutz Maoz Khaim* near the Jordan River. They will take good care of you."

"I know the place," Eli said, "I'll drop them off at the B'not Ya'akov Bridge, where they can wade across the river and hide in the bushes. I'll go to the *kibbutz* and tell them to pick up the boys."

"When do we leave for Palestine?" I asked .

"Tomorrow morning.," Eli said, "now let's get settled for the night."

"Tomorrow will be my eighteenth day in Baghdad," I said. "

"Eighteen in Hebrew numerology means 'life'" Daron replied.

12

From the moment the seven buses began to rumble down the highway I was in a state of euphoria. I felt like a little boy whose boundless energy makes him jump and run about without any apparent purpose. My whole body tingled with excitement as the minarets of Baghdad dissolved into a haze. My recollection of the three days it took the convoy to cross the arid expanse of the desert and reach the Jordan River comes back to me in a cloud of nostalgia. Never again would I experience such exhilaration, such joy of anticipation. I could not sit still in the bus; I walked up and down the aisle, I exercised, I sang and made Daron sing with me.

Some one hundred and fifty British soldiers and four officers occupied five buses; one contained food supplies, a field kitchen and military equipment. Daron and I were in Eli's bus, that trailed the other vehicles. I felt a bit sorry for Daron during stop-overs, when he had to lie under our bus, usually parked some distance from the others, pretending to do some repair work. It was his turn now to suffer bodily discomfort while I mingled with the officers, a captain and three lieutenants, and drank with them.

I hit it off with the captain whose name eludes me though I remember his tall, lean frame, a shock of blond hair and brooding blue eyes. He was a lecturer of English literature at the University of Kent. Once again Conrad invaded my life. When I asked him whether he knew that Conrad lived in the county of Kent, he smiled and said, of course, he knew of him; and, in fact, had read some of his books. I mentioned *Lord Jim*, and got a little lecture about *Under Western Eyes*, which the good captain considered to be a much better novel.

The captain's main interest, however, was Shakespeare not Conrad. He must have missed teaching badly, and his fellow officers appeared pretty bored by his literary talk, which one lieutenant dubbed "bloody nit-picking" when his superior was not within earshot. During our first stop at the trackless desert, the captain shared a bottle of whisky with me, enhancing my intoxication. He found an eager listener in me, and I joined him in his rendition of a song from (I learned much later) *The Twelfth Night*:

O mistress mine, where are you roaming?

O, stay and hear; your true love's coming...

Not knowing any English songs, I reciprocated with a rendition of *Pesenka O Kapitanye,* A Song about a Sea Captain, my first attempt at translation from the Russian into English:

Once there was a captain brave,

And he sailed the ocean wave...

The captain, who crossed many oceans and never blinked an eye in any storm or danger, falls in love like a young lad, and sings to himself:

Smile, oh Captain, only smile,

It is the flag of your ship,

It's the banner of your style,

Pull yourself up, never slip,

Only the brave rule the sea.

I'm not even sure that this awkward translation is entirely mine; perhaps in the course of the years I might have read it somewhere. But regardless of its merit, *my* captain in that convoy liked it well enough, and in his inebriated enthusiasm, praised my baritone voice, calling it "mellifluous," a word I did not understand. It sounded Latin

to me, so I tried to figure it out. *Melis* means honey; *fluere* means to flow. I was flattered that the captain thought my voice sweet.

Strange, isn't it? The trivial things you remember of what at the time you regarded as the most earth-shaking, wondrous happening of your life.

The six buses of the convoy crossed the B'not Ya'akov Bridge into Palestine. Our bus stopped a short distance from it. As the guards at the bridge were checking Eli's papers, we waded across the Jordan, and hid in a grove. Eli had told us to wait at the edge of a dirt road, as he headed for *Kibbutz Maoz Haim* in the Beth She'an Valley, just south of the Jordan Valley.

We crouched on the ground for an hour or so. Then we heard the sound of a lumbering truck. A young man in khaki shorts and a sweaty blue shirt stepped out, and motioned to us to get in.

"*Sh'me Ehud*," he said, " *Brukhim habayim.*"

"Ehud's welcome, "Daron said, "means,'Blessed are those who have arrived.'"

I was moved by this Biblical greeting. At last, I thought, at last we are in the land of Israel. Now I must learn Hebrew.

13

When you stir in your bed in an unfamiliar room, still half-awake, you summon your memory to identify your surroundings. In the beginning of this process, your memory draws little fragments from the past, immediate or more distant, and your half-conscious mind attempts to put together a mass of disassembled bits of a puzzle. You ask yourself, "Where am I? What is this place? What is happening to me? " You try to re-arrange the puzzle, so it can be perceived as one recognizable picture.

I recall my first days at Maoz Haim through a haze, trying to piece together disjointed images. Half-awake on the first morning. Irene, in a white gown, bending over my bed, her hair loose, falling about my face like a fragrant canopy, her eyes glittering with merriment, which I find odd; why is she amused? I want to throw my arms about her and draw her closer, but I cannot move a limb. I feel paralyzed. Irene rises and beckons to me, but I remain inert and mute, unable to follow her. Slowly, very slowly, as if she were in a trance, she retreats to the door. I try to call her but no words escape from my mouth. The apparition dissolves in the bright sunlight drifting into the room from the window, and I wake up. I see Daron sleeping on a cot next to mine. Now I remember the evening meal with dozens of young people; the sound of the Hebrew language, rapid, racy colloquial Hebrew; Daron sitting beside me, chatting with the people across the table, while I feel isolated by the linguistic barrier between myself and the cheerful crowd.

It is strange that except for Ehud, the driver who picked us up near the Jordan crossing, I remember only one kibbutz member, whom I saw when I stepped outside of the bungalow, swathed in blooming bougainvillea, where we had spent our first

night. I breathed the fresh air and stretched my arms. A young woman in khaki shorts and a blue blouse, embroidered with white flowers, strode out of a house across the road. She was holding a naked baby boy under her arm, like a parcel, and a towel draped her neck. She came up to an outdoor faucet, and washed the boy who protested the cold water treatment with loud squeals. But he stopped crying and babbled happily after his mother wrapped him in the towel and held him in her arms, singing a soft Hebrew melody to him.

I walked about the kibbutz, admiring the cypress trees that were marshaled along its borders like stately sentinels, the neat flower beds and lawns in front of the houses and bungalows. But the elation of reaching *Eretz Yisrael* had faded. A sense of emptiness and a lethargy came upon me now that there was no immediate danger even though I and Daron were illegal immigrants in the British-ruled Palestine, subject to deportation to detention camps in Cyprus. They were not like the Nazi concentration camps, where the prisoners were systematically killed, but they were prisons nonetheless, with barbed wire fences and armed guards. We were told that we could leave the kibbutz after getting fake identity cards, listing Palestine as our place of birth.

Three of my major objectives had been accomplished: surviving in and getting out of the oppressive Soviet Union; quitting the hateful Army of General Anders; and reaching the Holy Land. But. after surmounting so many obstacles, I faced no immediate challenge. Neither Daron nor I intended to stay at Maoz Haim, though we welcomed the opportunity to work in the orange and banana groves. We were not cut out for communal life. But where was I to go and what was I to do, being penniless, without any documents about my education in Poland and the Soviet Union? And how was I to reconcile my passion for the English language with the

present necessity of mastering Hebrew?

I had no answers to these questions but somehow I believed that things would work out, as they did in Baghdad, where we found several guardian angels like Dr. Rosenfeld, Enzo Sereni, Moshe Dayan, Shlomo, Shulamith and Eli. I was truly blessed, on many occasions in my life, to encounter men and women without whose help and guidance I would not have survived or developed into a productive and creative human being. And now my destiny again provided a guardian angel in the person of Aunt Gonya.

I had mentioned her name to Eli, who lived in Petah-Tiqua, a town not far from Kfar-Saba, where Aunt Gonya owned a small orange grove and where she practiced medicine in her own clinic. Eli paid her a visit and told her about me and Daron. Gonya , a most practical woman, went into action at once. She dispatched her cousin Zyoma Meisler to Maoz Haim to check me out.

When I was fifteen, Zyoma took me and my brother to a summer camp of the leftist *Shomer Ha'tzair* Movement. I enjoyed the fragrant pine woods and the discussions of books like Jack London's *The Sea Wolf* but was bored stiff by the arguments about the future socialist Jewish society in the Holy Land. A couple of years later, in 1938 Zyoma must have wearied of those fierce debates, for he translated his convictions into action: he emigrated to Palestine. He lived with Aunt Gonya for a few months, and then joined the kibbutz *Mishmar Ha'Emek*, where he taught school. During the War of Independence an Egyptian plane circled over his kibbutz. Zyoma took his pupils into a trench. He stood up to see what was going on. He was hit by a piece of shrapnel from the single bomb dropped by the aircraft. It sheared off a big piece of his brain. He left a wife and a son.

When Zyoma came to visit me at Maoz Haim, he was still unmarried. I

remembered him as a wiry, intense boy of nineteen, a dynamic speaker and organizer. He hadn't changed much in physical appearance, but he looked much older than his years. He spoke deliberately, quietly, as if he had some difficulty with his Polish. He wanted to know about his family in the town of Dubno, which was not far from Luts'k where I grew up. But I knew nothing about the fate of the Jewish families in his or my town, and I feared the worst.

"Tell me about Aunt Gonya," I said, "The only thing I know about her is that she used to send us an occasional carton of oranges and monthly checks for the tuition fees in the private high school which my brother and I attended. "

"Gonya is a remarkable woman;" Zyoma replied, "She's got guts. Years ago, when the roads were not safe, she'd ride a donkey from Kfar-Saba to Tel-Aviv, packing an old Russian revolver, stuck into her skirt. Her home is virtually a hotel for refugees and people in need, not necessarily her relatives. Gonya is living with Ivan Sidorenko, a former officer in Petlyura's nationalistic Ukranian army during the last years of World War I. They kidnaped her and forced her to serve as a front-line doctor. He fell in love with her, and she brought him to Palestine. Unlike most Ukrainians, Sidorenko is not an anti-Semite. The Ukrainians had no problems cutting Jewish throats when they staged pogroms, but Sidorenko, whom we call Uncle Vanya, is a gentle soul. He is squeamish about shedding blood, any blood. He refuses to slaughter pigeons, which Aunt Gonya likes to cook, so she has to rely on her Arab patients. In fact almost all of her patients are Arabs, which does not exactly endear her to the exclusively Jewish population of Kfar-Saba. So, brace yourself. You'll have to act as a kind of non-ritual *shoychet* and slaughter the poor pigeons for them."

"I've done worse things," I said.

"Their *pardes* is not a typical orange grove. It looks more like a tiny old Ukrainian farm, with chickens running in the yard. There's a rooster Uncle Vanya calls Piłsudski, after the famous Polish Marshall. Vanya doesn't like the Poles. There's an old dog they call Moorza. When it dies they will get another mutt, which will also be called Moorza. And the present rooster will be succeeded by another cock, dubbed Marshall Piłsudski."

Before Zyoma left Maoz Haim he chatted with Daron, and took the measurements of our feet, height and waist. A few days later Aunt Gonya came to the kibbutz in a taxi. She was a small, thin woman in a black frock. She had a prominent nose and plain features, but her eyes sparkled with a youthful glow. The taxi driver took out a large carton, and followed her into our room.. She looked at me a bit tearfully, and stretched out her arms. She hugged and kissed me as if I were her own son.

"You're a spitting image of Yasha," Gonya said in Russian, referring to her beloved brother-- my father whom I never knew, for he left Luts'k for Argentina when I was eighteen months old. We unpacked the carton. She had bought everything in two sets, one for me and another for Daron: boots, long pants, shorts, shirts, underwear, socks, sweaters and jackets..

"You're coming with me to Kfar-Saba," Aunt Gonya announced. Turning to Daron, she added, "I hope you'll visit us soon."

"Oh, I will," Daron said, "and thank you so much for these gifts..

After supper I said good-bye to Daron and the Maoz Haim people. I left the kibbutz with Aunt Gonya She sat next to me in the back of the car and handed a leather-bound book to me..

"Another gift?" I exclaimed, "really, Aunt, you shouldn't."

"Eli told me you spoke English fluently. This is something that'll help you with both Hebrew and English."

The book was a bilingual Bible, with the text in English on the left and Hebrew on the right.

"Thanks so much, Aunt Gonya," I said, opening the book where she had inserted a bookmark. In the fading light of the early evening I could still read the passage in the book of Samuel, which she had highlighted: 'Moreover, I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and I will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, *and move no more.*" These words were like the breath of a warm wind that dispelled the dark clouds of my sky.